


2008

## From Textbooks To Safety Briefings: Helping Technical Writers Negotiate Complex Rhetorical Situations

Brian Blackburne  
*University of Central Florida*

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FROM TEXTBOOKS TO SAFETY BRIEFINGS: HELPING  
TECHNICAL WRITERS NEGOTIATE COMPLEX RHETORICAL  
SITUATIONS

by

BRIAN D. BLACKBURNE

B.A. Texas A&M University, 1996

M.A. University of North Texas, 2000

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term  
2008

Major Professor: Melody Bowdon  
Co-Chair: Karla Saari Kitalong

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I analyze the organizational and political constraints that technical writers encounter when dealing with complex rhetorical situations, particularly within risk-management discourse. I ground my research in case studies of safety briefings that airlines provide to their passengers because these important documents have long been regarded as ineffective, yet they've gone largely unchanged in the last 20 years. Airlines are required to produce these safety briefings, which must satisfy multiple audiences, such as corporate executives, federal safety inspectors, flight attendants, and passengers. Because space and time are limited when presenting safety information to passengers, the technical writers must negotiate constraints related to issues such as format, budget, audience education and language, passenger perceptions/fears, reproducibility, and corporate image/branding – to name a few. The writers have to negotiate these constraints while presenting important (and potentially alarming) information in a way that's as informative, realistic, and tasteful as possible. But such constraints aren't unique to the airline industry. Once they enter the profession, many writing students will experience complex rhetorical situations that constrain their abilities to produce effective documentation; therefore, I am looking at the theories and skills that we're teaching our future technical communicators for coping with such situations. By applying writing-style and visual-cultural analyses to a set of documents, I demonstrate a methodology for analyzing complex rhetorical situations. I conclude by proposing a pedagogy that teachers of technical communication can employ for helping students

assess and work within complex rhetorical situations, and I offer suggestions for implementing such practices in the classroom.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I begin by offering my sincerest thanks to my family, friends, and colleagues. You have sustained me throughout this process, and I am grateful for you. My parents, Lois and Edward, have never doubted my aspirations, and for thirty-five years, each has been there to counsel me, provide a supportive word, and just be mom and dad. From teaching me to read to listening to my musings about this dissertation, they have certainly seen a long-term project come to fruition. Theirs is a job well done. My brother, Edward, and his wife, Nicolé, have also shown boundless support and enthusiasm for my endeavors, and my relationships with them have defined me as both person and scholar.

My friends have been an amazing source of inspiration throughout my studies, and even as our life experiences take us around the world, we still maintain the bonds that make such relationships special in the first place. In Austin, I have my dear friend, Daniel Turner. His initiative to flourish in industry and academy alike have inspired me since our undergraduate days at Texas A&M. In Boston, I have Sonya Kix, who was one of my first “writer” friends. Her editorial skills and flare for telling a story are unmatched, and my writing and my life have been enriched in the years that we’ve been friends. In Dallas, I have Richard Catron, Toni Ferris, Adam Knippa, and Naheeda Nelson. Aside from being remarkable friends and smart, successful people, they possess razor-sharp wits that have kept me laughing and quick on my conversational feet all these years. In Orlando, I give thanks to Phyllis Burzeé, Julius John, and Dwain Moore. Their talents

and individual dedications to art, education, and life keep me simultaneously entertained, engaged, and enthusiastic. I also owe immense thanks to Jane Moody, a fellow T&T scholar and colleague. Jane is one of those smart people who can engage in substantive conversation about anything. She has certainly helped me hone my research through our ongoing dialogue, and she has also been a compassionate friend.

The English Faculty at the University of Central Florida is integral to my accomplishments in the Texts and Technology program. Appropriately, those who have most inspired me as teachers have also guided me as committee members. Thank you to David Wallace for helping me acclimate to the program during my first semesters and for helping shape the initial papers that became this dissertation. I also want to thank my outside reader, Rudy McDaniel. Your perspective and academic zeal are simply inspiring. To my teaching mentor and co-chair, Karla Kitalong, I thank you for having a true open-door policy and for never kicking me out when I dropped in for an unannounced chat. Finally I thank my advisor, Melody Bowdon. Your sage guidance has seen me through my studies, my research, and sometimes my life outside of the classroom. The only disappointment I feel with this dissertation is that it marks the end of our weekly “dissertating” meetings (and e-mails and text messages) – all of which made me a smarter person and better writer.

Thank you, everyone.

To Mom and Dad



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# CHAPTER 1: SPOTTING A GAP

## Introduction

Current technical communication textbooks emphasize the act of analyzing an audience as the cornerstone for creating effective documentation. Though the practice of thorough audience analysis *is* integral to creating successful documents, too often textbooks mistake *audience analysis* for *rhetorical situation*. Such books take a seemingly pragmatic approach to the rhetorical situation by focusing on basic audience characteristics like education, experience, and attitude. But as Lloyd Bitzer explains, the audience is just one component of the rhetorical situation. Writers are still left to reconcile the document's exigency as well as the complex of constraints that influence the writer (and ultimately the reader) (7). This viewpoint echoes Aristotle's three means of persuasion:

There are, then, these three means of effecting persuasion. The man who is to be in command of them must, it is clear, be able (1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions-that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited. (182)

My experiences as a technical writer have taught me that dealing with the constraints affecting writers can be the most difficult aspect of creating documents that meet the readers' needs. Curiously, substantive discussions of these constraints are

consistently missing from technical communication textbooks. Acknowledging this incongruence, Cezar Ornatowski explains:

The mechanisms for “audience analysis,” for determining the reader’s needs, for analyzing the situation, offer no tools for discerning or discussing the more subtle, and essentially political, choices, pressures, and agendas that one encounters in real environments (179).

And acknowledging these political constraints at a higher level, Stephen Katz reminds us that “to perform well in a professional organization, writers must adopt the *ethos* of that organization” (185). We could characterize this delicate relationship between writer and organization with Ornatowski’s thoughts:

... technical communication is well suited to serve as the rhetorical instrument of organizational-bureaucratic rationality. It is also uniquely, and conveniently, congruent with the cultural self-perceptions of the people who dominate business and industrial organizations. (181)

Providing further emphasis on “real world” experiences, Driskill reminds us that we must consider the “culture, values, history, and ways of thinking that determine the criteria for judging communication practice in a *real* organization” (119; emphasis added).

The implications of these words are clear: We must provide students with the necessary tools for discerning and discussing complex rhetorical situations; otherwise, we

risk graduating students into industry without the *critical power tools*<sup>1</sup> necessary for successfully negotiating the “real environments” that they’ll inevitably encounter.

Currently, teachers address deficiencies in textbooks by relaying personal experiences as technical writers, involving outside speakers, or supplementing textbooks with readings that bring critical perspectives to reading and understanding texts.<sup>2</sup> But we should remember that universities commonly rely on graduate teaching assistants to cover their writing courses, and many of these teachers are as new to the topic of technical communication as their students. Such instructors have no professional experiences or connections for helping address gaps in teaching rhetorical situation (if they even spot such gaps in the first place).

Though my discussion so far has been rooted in perceived issues with technical communication textbooks, my goal in this dissertation is to demonstrate the intricacies of analyzing and understanding the constraints that make up complex rhetorical situations. To facilitate my discussion, I will focus on one genre of document with a rhetorical situation involving the general public, large industries, and governmental agencies: the airline safety briefing. And to make this discussion relevant to the challenges of addressing situations in which texts are (re)mediated by technologies, I will further focus my discussion by analyzing multimedia safety presentations. In the next section, I

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<sup>1</sup> I use this phrase as homage to Blake Scott’s (et al) *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies*, which I return to in chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> The methods that I’ve provided aren’t all-inclusive, but represent common approaches that I’ve practiced and observed, as well as those reported by other teachers. See chapter 2 for more information about a survey that I conducted with teachers of technical communication.

describe how I became involved with this case study and how it has affected my dissertation path.

### 9/12/01: The Beginning of my Research

The path that led me to the point of this dissertation spans more than just the four years that I've spent fulfilling the requirements of my doctoral program. In the Fall of 2001, I was working as a teaching adjunct at the University of North Texas, where I had completed my Master's degree in Technical Communication the year before. I was working as a fulltime technical writer for a start-up dotcom while teaching one night per week at the university. I remember the opening weeks of that semester more vividly than those from any of the last eight years.

I first met with my students during the last week of August. Over the following Labor Day weekend, I flew to Portland to visit an old friend from college. As I sat on one of the planes, I looked through the safety brochure in the seat pocket before me. This act was nothing new for me; I collected those briefings as a child. But for the first time, I was reading one of these documents as a technical writer. While looking at the myriad of photographs and icons on the pages, I began to realize that these documents were poorly designed for the complex information that they presented. When I returned to school the next week, I made twenty-seven copies of this particular brochure and told my students that they'd be assessing the document. They hadn't read Bitzer, so I gave them a ten-minute rendition of his article on rhetorical situation before splitting them into groups and



distributing an assignment sheet. They'd have two weeks to analyze the document and propose a plan for revising it.

The day that we were to meet for our initial discussion of the briefings was Wednesday, September 12, 2001. As I walked into the classroom that evening, I had already found an alternative document for the students to analyze because the one I had initially chosen no longer felt appropriate. The nation was in a state of shock and panic, and commercial airliners were at the forefront of the hysteria. All commercial and civil aircraft in the country had been indefinitely grounded, and when the occasional police or military aircraft flew over the streets of Dallas, people fixed their fearful gazes on those airborne anomalies until they were safely out of striking distance. In a melancholic coincidence, the brochures that I'd distributed to my students the week before came from one of the airlines that had lost two aircraft and hundreds of lives just 36 hours prior to my walking into class that Wednesday night.

To my surprise, the students protested when I suggested our changing topics for the rhetorical analysis. Though they had seemed interested in the document when I assigned it on September 5, something had changed in the week since, and they were approaching the document from the vantage of a new shared condition. They were viewing the document as members of a post-9/11 society (though the term 9/11 hadn't even entered the vernacular yet). Flying now represented fears that went beyond safely maintaining and operating aircraft; it now encompassed national security while ushering in a new xenophobia. In the final months of 2001, this shared condition continued to

change as the economy, which had reached record highs under the influence of the dot-com boom, began to slip. By November, many of my colleagues and I were without jobs; the nation prepared to go to war; and a “Freedom Ain’t Free” bravado swept popular culture. In just a few hours, four airplanes had left an indelible mark on our lives, and even in 2008, this shared condition persists.

During my first semester in the Texts and Technology program, I was required to make a presentation on a possible long-term research project. I decided to use this opportunity to explore my collection of airline safety documents, drawing upon the “new” theorists I was learning about: Bolter, Norman, and Fiske (and what would eventually include many others). Initially, I thought that the answer to the airlines’ problems with effectively communicating safety information was remediation. I envisioned technologically advanced (and cost-prohibitive) solutions that would enable passengers to experience safety information in previously unimagined ways. But as I conducted further research, I realized that even with a remediated interface, these documents would still be subject to operating within a complex rhetorical situation. Before I could change the look and feel of airline safety, I needed to fully understand the new rhetorical situation, which involved a changed set of passenger fears and frustrations, new regulations and procedures, and an economic climate for the airlines that has only continued to worsen. From that point, I shifted my focus from remediation to rhetoric, from schematics to politics. Before I could propose changes for these documents, I would first have to understand the complex rhetorical situation that surrounded them.

## Overview of this Dissertation

As I researched this rhetorical situation, I continued teaching technical writing courses. And I began to notice my wanting more information regarding rhetorical situation from the textbooks that I was adopting every semester. I wanted my students to have the benefit of critical perspectives and tools for effectively understanding and writing for similar organizations – perspectives and tools that are chiefly omitted from technical communication textbooks. In the following sections, I summarize the next four chapters, which form my argument, demonstrate my methods, and summarize my work into a methodology that teachers can apply – and tailor – in their technical communication courses.

### Chapter 2: Constrained Technical Writers in the Workplace

I begin this chapter by describing the rhetorical-situation gap that I've observed in technical communication textbooks. Drawing upon Bitzer's definition of rhetorical situation, I continue with my experiences as a technical writer both before and after the dot-com bubble burst in 2001. By comparing work environments and corporate cultures, I demonstrate organizational constraints that can affect writers and their subsequent readers. The topic of organizational constraints gives way to a discussion of politics, agency, and ethics – on the parts of writers and organizations alike. Looking at observations from writers such as Slack et al., Dragga, and Ornatowski, I situate the roles of technical writers as perceived by leaders in the field. I also discuss the results from a survey that I conducted with teachers of technical communication to underscore the

importance of the methodology that I propose in Chapter 5 for teaching rhetorical situation. I then introduce the implications of working under organizational constraints to create *unused* documents. This notion of the *unused* allows me to introduce the case study for my work in the remaining chapters in which I conduct a full rhetorical analysis of airline safety briefings.

### Chapter 3: Airline Safety Briefings – A Complex of Restraints

Chapter 3 focuses on the safety briefings that are provided to all airline passengers. These documents have long been regarded as ineffective and have been fodder for usability critiques, governmental studies, and satirical commentary. By first presenting the government's regulations for producing, and suggestions for improving, these briefings, I stress the accuracy of the popular perceptions toward these documents. I then look at the stakeholders involved with the production and use of these documents and discuss how the organizational politics associated with these stakeholders affects the finished products. Finally I discuss the main deficiencies with the current printed safety briefings, and I introduce theoretical justifications from Gee, Bolter, and Norman for making safety briefings both technologically inventive and aesthetically attractive.

### Chapter 4: Assessing the State of the Art in Airline Safety Briefings

In Chapter 4, I introduce the two lenses through which I assess current safety briefings: Technical Communication and Visual Cultural Analysis. Because airlines continue to devote more resources to their video briefings and because these briefings

offer greater variety in the design and presentation of safety information, I focus my analysis on the video briefings of five major airlines. Focusing on video briefings allows me to employ theories from my studies in Texts and Technology – theories that have previously been excluded from the discussion of airline safety demonstrations. Drawing upon Joseph Williams’ methods for assessing writing style, I conduct an analysis of the scripts from the five airlines’ safety briefings. Expounding upon the discussion of technical style, I introduce the concept of euphemism to my analysis, looking at popular representations of airline euphemisms as well as those common to our everyday communications. Because of the nature of the safety briefings (videos), I’m able to look at three dimensions of euphemism (verbal, visual, and aural) and provide qualitative descriptions of their functions in each airline’s briefings. The second lens that I use to analyze the safety briefings is Visual Cultural Analysis. Recalling methodologies from Philip Bell, Martin Lister and Liz Wells, and Victoria O’ Donnell, I conduct a visual cultural analysis of the five briefings and use my results to test hypotheses about the state of safety briefings. To end this chapter, I discuss the results of a focus group that I conducted with UCF students who had recently completed international air travel. By engaging the students in activities related to their perceptions of safety briefings in general and asking them questions about the five briefings analyzed in this chapter, I provide further insight into the shared conditions of passengers and the complexities of the rhetorical situation while comparing my findings with the other analyses in this chapter.

## Chapter 5: Compiling a Methodology

In Chapter 5, I reflect on my discussions and analyses from the previous three chapters and incorporate Thomas Huckin's concept of *community affiliations*. In doing so, I compile my methodology for understanding a complex rhetorical situation. I intend for this methodology to function as a "low-cost" tool for writers to sort out complex rhetorical situations. To help teachers better inform their students on using this tool, I review the techniques that form my methodology and discuss possible applications of these techniques in the classroom. I finish by discussing possible extensions of this project and future research goals.

## CHAPTER 2: CONSTRAINED TECHNICAL WRITERS IN THE WORK PLACE

### Introduction

In this chapter, I begin by discussing Lloyd Bitzer's definition of *rhetorical situation* and underscore my observations of how this important concept is missing from popular technical communication textbooks. I then use components of the rhetorical situation to expound upon my experiences as a professional writer<sup>3</sup> and to introduce some of the constraints that professional writers face while on the job. Focusing on what I believe to be the most significant constraint (the politics of the organization in which the writer works), I continue by addressing the ethical implications of writing documents that serve organizations more than the intended audiences. This discussion of ethics leads me toward the concepts of *truth*, *knowledge*, and *power*, and how these are influenced by agency – of both the writer and the organization. I then introduce the concept of writing *unused* documents – or those intended for audiences who, statistically speaking, will never need them. Finally, I introduce the case study that I'll be working with in Chapters 3 and 4.

### Mailroom Talk: Discovering a Gap in Technical Communication Textbooks

Recently, I stood in my department's mailroom talking to one of my professors, who – at the time – was the director of my university's writing program and an

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<sup>3</sup> The value of writers' reflecting on their professional experiences and incorporating them into academic discussions of writing in the workplace is demonstrated by Savage and Sullivan's collection of stories from technical writers (see *Writing a Professional Life...*).

accomplished technical communicator in her own right. That day, our discussion was about a recurring hot topic: choosing textbooks for our upcoming crop of tech-writing students. Like two kids trading baseball cards, we went down the list of which texts we had on our shelves, which ones we'd actually used, and which ones we liked the best. After a brief pause, she looked at me and said with a sigh, "Eh, give me any of those books, and I can teach the class." This statement wasn't one of pedagogical prowess, though she *is* an excellent teacher, as much as an observation of the offerings for teachers in our field. For the most part, all the books *are* the same.

They contain a certain canon of information and practices that have helped define the role of the modern-day technical writer. A text's presentation or accompanying website may help decide whether it gets adopted, but my boss was right; I could pick up just about any of the desk copies lining my shelves and plan a course without even having read it. I know that the first few chapters of the book will contain information on the writing process, writing in the workplace, and ethics; somewhere between chapters 6 and 10 is where I'll find information on writing style and document design; and the teen chapters will get me into reports, instruction manuals, and proposals. Finding my way through a technical writing text is more about habit than instinct, and similarly, the information that I seek is usually presented just as I'd expect. Table 1 provides a snapshot of five popular textbooks by detailing the number of chapters in each text and the chapters in which major themes/genres appear. Just looking at a few key organizational points in the texts, we can see the similarity in their overall structures.



Table 1: An Overview of Five Popular Technical Communication Textbooks

<b>Title (Author)</b>	<b>No. of Chapters</b>	<b>Audience Analysis</b>	<b>Style</b>	<b>Proposals</b>
Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach (Anderson)	23	Ch. 3	Ch. 7	Ch. 22
Technical Communication Today (Johnson-Sheehan)	23	Ch. 3	Ch. 7	Ch. 20
Technical Communication (Markel)	21	Ch. 5	Ch. 10	Ch. 16
Technical Report Writing Today (Riordan)	20	Ch. 2	Ch. 4	Ch. 12
Technical Communication for Readers and Writers (Sims)	19	Ch. 2	Ch. 7	Ch. 12

As a teacher and professional writer, I've learned to use my experiences in the workplace to supplement the information that my students read in their texts. And one area that I've consistently had to supplement is the gap that I find when I teach students about rhetorical analysis. I say gap because when I left school and began my career as a professional communicator, I immediately realized that understanding and writing for an audience wasn't the writer's only objective. I had an obligation to protect the interests of my company and/or the people who might be affected by the intended audience's actions once my document was distributed. I also found myself having to justify my very existence at some companies while taking on responsibilities that weren't in my job description (but that seemed like a good application of a person who just sat and pushed words around the screen all day). Karen Schriver has noted similar attitudes relative to how companies view their writers: "...writing in some companies is construed as a marginal activity that adds to an organization's costs but that contributes neither to "the

bottom line” nor the quality of products and services” (77). For me, being a good writer was no longer about addressing my audience’s needs. I was now in a juggling act that involved audience, boss, co-workers, and the general public. In essence, I was mediating a complex system that invariably shaped the information that I was trying to communicate – all in hopes of meeting deadlines without working overtime.

### Acknowledging the Real Rhetorical Situation: Organizational Constraints Imposed on Technical Writers

Any major-market technical communication textbook will discuss the importance of audience analysis, which is part of rhetorical analysis, which refers to Bitzer’s *rhetorical situation*. Bitzer puts it best when he states:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (6)

Bitzer’s writing was one of the first assigned readings when I began my studies as a technical communicator, and I’ve always assumed that teachers of technical writing kept his idea in mind when helping students navigate the tricky situation of understanding and writing for an audience. Still, terms like “rhetorical analysis” or “rhetorical situation” don’t present themselves in the books that I read. Instead, we receive the simpler “audience analysis.”

Our students read in their texts that audience analysis is necessary for creating successful documentation because we can't create the proper documents if we don't know who will be using them. In simplest terms, we would say that writers need to know their readers. Audience analysis is typically, and rightfully so, explained as one of the first steps in the documentation process, and it is reiterated throughout any given textbook. Recently I taught a class of students who worked with Mike Markel's popular book: *Technical Communication* (now in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition). Similar to other authors, Markel talks about writers' understanding readers based on the following:

- Their relationship to the document – are they primary or secondary audiences?
- Their category – are they experts, technicians, managers, or general readers?
- Their individual characteristics – what's their education, professional experience, attitude, etc...?

This type of analysis is quite useful, and many business people could stand to do a better job of considering their audiences – whether writing e-mails to colleagues or preparing research proposals. Still, this type of analysis is also limited in that it focuses solely on the audience, which is just part of the rhetorical situation. As Bitzer explains, the rhetorical situation has three distinct elements:

The first is the *exigence*; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the *audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience. (7)

So in the rhetorical situation, we have the occasion that's necessitating the communication, the audience receiving the communication, and the constraints that influence the writer charged with making the communication. And for all the books I've read that focus on the audience's situation, I see little discussion of addressing, let alone understanding, the very complex constraints under which a writer operates (See Anderson, Markel, Johnson-Sheehan, and Sims for examples of discussions of audience analysis). I suspect that these constraints are left out because too many possibilities await students in the workplace, and the authors would conceivably double the lengths of their texts if they attempted to cover all the constraints. Also authors could have a difficult getting a consensus of which constraints to include in their discussions. To get a better sense of what others do/think about teaching rhetorical situation, I conducted a survey with teachers of college-level technical communication courses.

### Methods: Surveying Teachers

To draw upon a broader sample of teachers than those at my university, I devised an online survey, which I distributed via the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) Listserv. In the survey, I asked teachers to rank the importance of concepts for technical communication students, answer questions about their primary texts, and share pedagogical techniques that they use for teaching rhetorical situation.<sup>4</sup> I received 15 responses to the survey, and although the sample is small, through it I gained varied perspectives about the importance of teaching rhetorical situation and techniques for addressing this topic in the classroom.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C for the online presentation of this survey.

## Survey Questions

I asked the survey participants to respond to the following questions:

1. What is the primary textbook that you typically use in your introductory technical communication course?

Title:

Author:

Publisher:

For the following set of questions, I'd like for you to think about the primary textbook that you listed in question 1.

In his article "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd Bitzer discusses the term *rhetorical situation* as a "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential [need]" (Bitzer 6). Bitzer also tells us that we can resolve this need if we introduce discourse into the situation that constrains human decision or action to the point of significantly modifying the need. Rhetorical situation is a key concept for students of technical communication because they must know more than just who their audience is when creating discourse; they must understand the "complex" that is presenting the need for the discourse.

Considering the above explanation of rhetorical situation, please answer the following questions:

2. Rank the following curriculum topics in order of importance for students who are learning about technical communication:

- Recursive writing/editing
- Project planning
- Audience analysis
- Ethics
- Organizational politics/ethos
- Physical work environment
- Rhetorical analysis

3. Which of the following tactics do you use to teach rhetorical situation?

- Scenarios or case studies
- Client-based projects (inside or outside the school)
- Service-learning projects
- Interviews with writers working in the field
- Analysis of documents from the field

4. What strategies does your textbook offer to help students solve ethical dilemmas that they will face in their daily work experiences?

- Simple advice that would apply to any situation, such as a discussion of the “Golden Rule” (treat people the way you’d like to be treated).
- Ethical models that help students deconstruct ethical dilemmas.

- Case studies about writers who are presented with good-versus-evil ethical challenges, such as concealing information about potential dangers to the public or confronting colleagues who encourage a writer to falsify information.
  - Role-playing scenarios that engage students by having them act out situations in class.
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_?
5. How would you characterize your textbook's treatment of risk communication?
- It provides a substantive discussion of risk communication.
  - It provides an overview of risk communication that I supplement with additional readings/activities.
  - It does not address risk communication sufficiently; either I cover this topic on my own or leave it out of my course.
6. Now I'd like to give you an opportunity to share your thoughts regarding the organizational constraints that writers may face while on the job. Do you have any special pedagogical techniques for helping students understand the complexities of the rhetorical situations in which they'll be writing?

### Results: Surveying Teachers

Of the fifteen teachers who responded to the survey, nine felt that *audience analysis* was the most important from the list of provided topics. Five of the remaining six teachers ranked *audience analysis* as second. I expected to see high rankings for audience analysis because most textbooks that I've reviewed put audience analysis at the beginning of the writing process and emphasize its importance throughout. *Physical work environment* was ranked (almost unanimously) as least important, with *organizational politics* and *ethics* coming in fourth and fifth places respectively. Table 2 summarizes the average rankings of curriculum topics for technical communication students. With organizational politics and ethics falling lower on the list, we may find that teachers are spending less time on these topics than necessary to engage students in the process of contemplating how their choices as writers fit within (or are influenced by) constraints in the rhetorical situation.



Table 2: Teacher Rankings of Curriculum Topics for Technical communication Students

Topic	Ranking <sup>5</sup>
Audience analysis	1
Rhetorical constraints	2
Project planning	3
Organizational politics	4
Ethics	5
Recursive writing/editing	6
Physical work environment	7

When the teachers were asked about the tactics they use to teach rhetorical situation, 93% reported using both case studies and analysis of documents from the field. 80% said that they used client-based projects, while 40% had students conduct interviews with writers in the field. Of the respondents, 33% reported using service-learning projects. The last question of the survey asked teachers to describe any special pedagogical techniques that they use for teaching rhetorical situation. I'll save my discussion of this topic for Chapter 5, in which I discuss my proposed pedagogy for teaching complex rhetorical situations, but this point of our discussion is a good place to interject the opinions that two teachers provided regarding the possible constraints that students may encounter in industry:

I try to help [students] understand how to write "standard" types of documents. But beyond that, we have no idea what sorts of things they

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<sup>5</sup> These rankings are based on the average "scores" that the topics received based on each respondent's ranking of the list.

will face at work, so I think that we can only generally prepare them to be ethical communicators and to tackl[e] each project carefully.

I try to share my own experiences from my days in industry, but even this doesn't get to them as much as being in the actual situation... We may try to help them build an ethical foundation, but until they are in a situation where there are no wrong answers (after all, stockholders who expect a profit should be as important to them as customers and colleagues), they won't really know how they will react.

### Limitations of the Study

Aside from the small sample size, my survey had the following limitations: Question 2, which asked the teachers to rank principles in order of importance for technical communication students, was flagged by two respondents as having overlapping categories. Also this question asked respondents to only rank the topics without expounding on how their rankings affect course content. These sorts of limitations could be easily addressed by my revising and re-administering the survey. But because I'm demonstrating a "low-cost" approach to assessing complex rhetorical situations, I think it important that the original data be used as much as possible. In industry, time and budget constraints often preclude writers from recursive research (especially when users' or experts' opinions are involved); instead, limitations are

typically captured in a “lessons learned” report, which is used to help avoid repeating research errors in future projects.

### My Encounters with Constraints

I’ve become intrigued by the notion of constraints because they can encompass so many things. Having worked in a variety of professional writing environments, I immediately recall some of the constraints that ultimately affected the documents that I was producing (and I think we’re safe in assuming that I wasn’t the only writer to experience such constraints). First, we could look at aspects of the writer’s actual work environment. Availability and quality of workspace could easily influence the documents that a writer produces. For example, just as the dot-com bubble burst back in 2001, I went from working in a posh office (replete with sliding glass doors on our cubicles, \$1600 ergonomic desk chairs, and all the snacks and gourmet coffee we could stomach) to a dismal government office (where everything was a busted-up, third-generation hand-me-down, and you could only dream about free coffee or snacks). After making that change, I remember noticing that work wasn’t such a fun place to be. In *Dynamics in Document Design*, Karen Schriver observes the same attitudes from writers working in similarly changed work environments: “Several writers commented that they felt ‘overworked and underpaid’ and ‘things had been better before the cutbacks’” (201).

Enduring my set of “cutbacks,” I had to share a cubicle for someone for the first three months, and even when I got my own cubicle, I had about half of the space and 1/10 of the budget for creating my documents. I went from having a flat-panel LCD monitor to

a CRT monitor that took up the majority of my limited desk space. Even printing a document became a chore because the shared printer was about one hundred feet (and one secured-access door) from my desk. I can honestly say that my documents began to reflect my new environment. Despite my preference to proof hard copies, I began editing most documents online because retrieving printouts was too much hassle. I also learned (the hard way) that my computer would crash invariably because it didn't have the necessary memory to edit large graphic files, so I stopped trying to make the documents visually rich. The same rhetorical elements that I once deliberately added to my documents were now missing simply because I couldn't get them to work.

A writer also faces constraints that have nothing to do with space or resources. I also once worked at a company that ran an online bartering community. People could trade what they had for what they wanted (much like they'd buy something at an auction site), and because of the nature of this site, we hired a high-powered team of lawyers to write our terms and conditions. I had just graduated with my Master's when I took this job, and I was elated that I'd been assigned to maintaining the terms and conditions that our customers (blindly) accepted before using the site. As with many websites, the terms and conditions lived in a small, scrollable text box at the bottom of the registration page. The document used ASCII text, so the only layout/design options were adding white space between lines and using ALL CAPS for headings. The worst part about this particular text was that when I copied and pasted it into a Word document, it was 25 pages long!

After getting my hands on the “terms” document, I spent my first week trying to understand and rewrite it. Fueled by the innocence and eagerness of a recent graduate, I quickly translated legalese into good, conversational prose. I also formatted the document using headings, color, lists, and other visual cues to help readers navigate the information. The resulting document was not significantly shorter, but it was easier to understand and had visual and textual signals as to its content. Unfortunately, my work was not well received. In fact, no one would even read it, much less consider using it. My company’s vice president of marketing was the person who oversaw that portion of our website, and she just smiled at me when I handed it to her. And if her bemused expression didn’t convey her feelings, her one question to me made everything clear: “Do you *know* how much we paid our lawyers to write this?” I hadn’t a clue, but at that point, I realized that a writer’s intentions, even when better for the reader, don’t always find their way into print. I also realized that I had failed to properly integrate myself into the context of my new job before striking out on such a fruitless tangent. As Anson and Forsberg explain:

. . .the writer must first become a “reader” of a context before he or she can be literate within it. This literacy does not seem restricted to mutual knowledge of some intellectual domain (cf. Hirsch, 1987) but includes highly situational knowledge than can be gained only from participating in the context. . . (405)

Anson and Forsberg continue their explanation of this “literacy” by hypothesizing that “the length of time it takes for such literacy to develop is dependent on the individual’s ability for social adaptation” (405).

The terms document that I’d spent a week rewriting stayed as the lawyers had originally envisioned and changed only whenever my V.P. decided to add a new feature to the site that wasn’t in the best interest of the users. In those instances, I’d always hear the same thing: “Put it in the terms and conditions. If they don’t read ‘em, it’s their fault.” Although I’d been hired based on my portfolio, recommendations from other writers, and the fact that I was supposed to be the subject matter expert on creating useful documentation, I wasn’t allowed to do what was really in the best interest of the readers *and* the company. These moments were pivotal in my understanding how commerce affects communication because I found myself doing what I knew was poor writing, even unethical writing, but I was still doing it – much like Schriver describes:

...the social and political context in which document designers worked appeared to reward them more for “not making textual waves” than for learning about their readers and inventing ways to talk to them. (201)

### Agency and Organizations

Having acknowledged my role in helping create and maintain organization-oriented (as opposed to reader-oriented) documentation, we can move into an important aspect of such decisions in the workplace: agency. In its purest sense, agency

encompasses a person's decision(s) to act. As opposed to uncontrollable, natural forces, agency is an attribute that is under human control, and it's an important consideration when analyzing how individuals develop and act in their worlds. Essentially, we have two notions of agency to which we can subscribe: causal or qualitative. Causal agency puts the onus of action on the individual, who desires something to happen and therefore makes it happen. Causal agency is certainly relevant when discussing writers' decisions, but it doesn't account for the situations in which many writers find themselves – those in which they're acting as part of community. This type of agency is accounted for by the qualitative view, which Charles Taylor describes as “the action of a community...irreducible to individual action” (93). Taylor's words are part of a detailed analysis of Hegel's philosophy of mind, and they point us in the direction of evaluating the technical writer as a facet in the organization's agency.

In *The Technical Communicator as Author: Meaning, Power, and Authority*, Slack, Miller, and Doak examine the technical communicator's role in the workplace by exploring different notions of the author. Slack et al. give us interesting explanations of the power that an author can possess in roles ranging from transmitter to mediator. Despite the rich discussion that this article provides, the most interesting point is made in the second-to-last paragraph:

Finally we would add to the education of technical communicators knowledge of how organizations operate – in the form of organizational communication or organization behavior. It is remarkable how little most

of us understand the relationship between power, knowledge, and organizations. It is time that we give up the faith that the goal of communication is always clarity and brevity. In practice, the politics of organizations and organizational politics often have as their goals limiting, obscuring, or hiding information. (33)

In the last sentence of the above excerpt, Slack et al. are recognizing qualitative agency or agency of the organization. For me, the most remarkable aspect of these remarks is that I only read them after starting my own musings on the situations in which I found myself having to deal with the organizations that (and I think it's worth repeating) "have as their goals limiting, obscuring, or hiding information" (Slack et al. 33). In the fifteen years that have passed since these words were written, I've seen only a few instances where organizations have clarified information that they used to purposefully obscure.

One example of an improved document relates to my first years as a college student. When Slack and her colleagues were writing their article, I was a freshman experiencing his first year away from home. One of the rites of being an 18-year-old student was that, as if by magic, credit card companies suddenly knew who I was. Their representatives were outside the student union enticing me with free t-shirts and other trivial tokens in exchange for my signature at the bottom of a credit application. I used to take the papers home and pore over them – trying to get a sense of what I was signing up



for. I had always been told to “look at the fine print,” and the print was *very* fine indeed. The most important information, the terms under which I’d have to pay back any money that I borrowed, was always the hardest to find and read on the page. And even with my best efforts, I made the mistake of signing up for cards that, save for few nice trinkets at sign-up, had horrible terms and conditions. Fifteen years later, banks still entice hapless students with credit cards. I still like to grab applications to take home, and I’ve noticed that the interest rate is no longer obscured on the page. In fact, I’ve found that some credit applications have the interest rate printed in a font 3-times the size of the other information. So score one for the big, bad credit companies. Of course, when I recently received the card that resulted from my completing one of these improved applications, enclosed was a booklet of terms and conditions, which were written on small pages in small fonts – in grey text, not the higher-contrast and easier-to-read black text that I might have expected.

### Truthful Communication

The previous examples have been leading me up to examining the notion of truth and how it is affected by individuals and the organizations that employ them. As a means for examining truth, I’d like to start with a few questions:

- What are the implications of providing information that is technically accurate, but presented with the tone, style, or design that makes the information less usable or easily accessible? What if communications contain, for instance, euphemisms?

- What if these euphemisms aren't governed by rules of writing but are instead depicted through images or sounds?<sup>6</sup>
- Are organizations behaving unethically when they choose to present information that might be offensive or upsetting in a kinder, more appealing way?

These questions lead me towards two discussions:

- Stylistic choices for depicting information.
- Ethics as they relate to understanding how writers react to organizational pressures to produce documents that aren't optimized for the users' experiences.

I'll look at stylistic choices in chapter 4 and focus now on ethics.

The topic of ethics typically receives (at most) a chapter's worth of discussion in technical communication text books, and those discussions employ techniques ranging from didactic anecdotes of wayward writers to models and rubrics for sorting out ethical dilemmas. But those of us who've ever faced an ethical dilemma, no matter how small, might agree that textbooks may play little-to-no role in helping us make the "right" decisions. Even university-trained technical communicators, who usually complete a substantial set of readings (if not one or two special-topics courses) devoted to ethical communication, report that what they read about ethics plays little part in how they solve on-the-job ethical issues (Dragga 166). In fact, Dragga's study of technical

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 for a complete assessment of specific documents' verbal, visual, and aural euphemisms.

communicators reveals that none of the writers he interviewed “arrive at their moral decisions by using a systematic technique or analytical heuristic” (168).

The concept of ethics (in classroom or textbook) is often simplified into situations that pit explicit right against explicit wrong. Lori Allen and Dan Voss wrote a textbook entitled *Ethics in Technical Communication*, and despite the 400 pages devoted to the nuances of the topic, their opening statements for a chapter on honesty sum up the underlying theme of their text:

We could begin by defining truth, but...it’s too difficult. Instead of waxing eloquent on the relative merits of Platonic idealism versus ontological realism, then, let’s get right down to the basics – values that even children grasp intuitively from their first communication:

- Honesty is telling the truth. It’s right.
- Dishonesty is lying. It’s wrong. (63)

Allen and Voss’ explanation of truth is pure and simple, but as it mentions, it also assumes a simplicity that we might reserve for children. *Right* and *wrong* imply a binary that doesn’t account for most of the situations that we find ourselves in. As adult writers functioning in organizations made up of other adults, our notion of truth is probably more closely linked to Foucault’s:

Truth is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it...it is produced and transmitted under the control,

dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation...(131-32).

We don't have the luxury of basing our actions on explicit right or wrong; instead, we're bound to consider how our actions affect us, the people we care about, the organizations in which we work, the world in which we live, and so on. This thought process echoes, if not causes, the ethical models that Allen and Voss discuss in their text, and these heuristics call on us to serve "the greatest good" while "hurt[ing] as few stakeholders as possible" (22). But terms like *good* and *hurt* create a binary similar to *right* and *wrong*. *Good* and *hurt* are emotionally charged words, and they may not apply to all situations. For instance, if a numbered list would help readers clearly understand what steps they need to follow in assembling a piece of office furniture, are we acting in a *bad* or *hurtful* manner if we save money for our company by using less space on the pages and burying the instructions in paragraphs? And if *good* or *hurt* don't apply in such a situation, does *truth*?

### The Truth Shan't Set You Free...

When I was a child, my mother worked at our church. In fact, she was the director of the children's ministry; so needless to say, I was at *all* of the children's activities. And the activity that I dreaded most was the annual Vacation Bible School. For whatever reason, the Bible was a book that intimidated me as a child, and I found that I had little

ability to absorb its content beyond the songs that we learned in class. One year, mom decided that we kids would all learn a verse from the Bible and recite it in front of the church congregation at the end of the week. I was absolutely terrified that I'd forget whatever verse I had to memorize. (Despite my ability to recite every line from *Mame* and *Gypsy*, I was sure that I couldn't accurately relay more than a one-liner from the Bible.) Fortunately for me, I had access to mom at home, and I pressed her to find the shortest thing that I could recite in front of the congregation. Being the good mom that she was, she gave me, "The truth shall set you free" (John 8.31-32). I immediately recognized those words, not from having appeared in the Bible but from being etched in the stone entry to my public school. Still, how I'd come to know that phrase didn't matter to me; it sounded smart, and it was as concise as concise could be. And that fateful Sunday morning, in front of 500 churchgoers, I nailed it!

The reason why I've just relayed my "truth" story to you is because, as I recounted above, I've been told that the truth would set me free since I was a child. And the concept of truth is integral to ethical communication. We might even say that truth only becomes relevant to our lives *when* we're communicating; otherwise, we have no opportunity to conceal it. But when we get into business writing, or technical communication, "truth" takes on different meanings because it's a relative and subjective term, and it doesn't reside only in the mind (or words) of the writer. Of the technical writers who I see on a regular basis, all would agree that truth – whether writing an accurate error message for a computer program or reporting dismal financial figures to a

group of investors – is at the root of technical communication. People need accurate and properly crafted information; they need truth. And my colleagues and I have striven to provide our readers with this type of accuracy. But we have also been put in situations where we had to write documents that obfuscated the truth either by omitting, slanting, or modifying information. We may find ourselves asking how good, honest writers could end up writing documents that don't have truth and total honesty at their cores. The answer lies not (necessarily) in the morals of the writers, but in the organizations in which these writers work and the politics that drive those organizations.

### The Implications of Ethics and Truth

In talking about ideal truth, I've been implying (not too subtly) its corruption at the hands of authors and organizations that see fit to present information in a way that, in a very pure sense, isn't truthful. But I should take a moment to explain that I'm not trying to vilify individuals or organizations, nor am I looking at instances of communication in which authors deliberately skew information for the sole purpose of hurting others and/or profiting at the expense of an intentionally misinformed audience. (For examples of such communications, we could turn to Sauer or Katz.) I have no experience with those types of situations, and I'm fortunate to report that I've not witnessed them either. My experiences are with everyday occurrences of communication that fall between explicit good and evil. At the same time, I don't mean to denigrate the significance of my own research. These everyday situations still have the potential to inflict harm on people, and they're slightly more complex because they're born not of ill-will or contempt for an

audience but a lack of consideration for how that audience would best benefit from deliberately truthful communications. I'm turning to commonplace, almost mundane, examples of documentation that have been adversely affected by technical writers and organizations that opt for the path of least resistance.

When Dragga writes about his survey of on-the-job technical communicators, he opens with this important statement, which helps us focus our discussion of truth and ethics:

A generation of technical communicators has passed through their classes on writing, editing, and designing information, without discussing the ethical *implications* of their writing, editing, and design choices.  
(emphasis added) 161

Despite the importance of writers' understanding how to approach and solve situations that call on their ethics, the implications of their decisions, not just the results, are equally worth discussing. At first glance, we could take Dragga's *implications* to mean the *results* of the decisions that writers make – that is how their decisions affect the audience. Asking the most basic of ethical questions, we wonder whether the writers' decisions help or hurt the audience – and to what extent. But what about when writers are creating documents that, statistically speaking, are almost never used? If writers find themselves in situations where they know that the vast majority of their audience will never need to use the document in question, then professional ethics become something

more difficult to nail down (as if they weren't difficult to begin with). If we assume that we're not reporting blatantly false or inaccurate information to this special audience who will probably never have to actually use our documents, what are we implying with our writing and design decisions? And if our audience doesn't literally *need* our information, what can we get away with reporting or, as might often be the case, excluding?

Before we can answer this question, we need to remember that the technical communicator is the product of his or her work environment. Truly, technical writers are necessitated by the organizations that have to present information to internal and external audiences. And the field of technical communication is still considered new by industry and academy alike. Given the relationship of this existence between writer and organization, we realize that the politics of the organization feed and complicate the rhetorical situation surrounding the documentation process. And we have some noteworthy comments regarding these organizations from some in-the-know writers:

- Dragga explains, “the immediate organization is thus the only social circle that [writers] consider to reinforce ethical obligations on the job” (170).
- Gregory Clark reminds us that writers must “cooperate” with their organizations, thus limiting “the ethical responsibility of professional communicators to contributing to the economic well-being for their particular organizations...” (190).
- Gerald Savage tells how organizations create situations in which writers “are likely to have little voice in deciding how they can portray the technologies



that they write about and little power to negotiate textual decisions that they believe may be dishonest or may not be in the interest of their audiences” (310).

- And the title of Carla Butenhoff’s piece from the 1977 ABCA Conference speaks volumes: *Bad Writing can be Good Business*. Beyond her title, she continues that business writing is “communication in a political and bureaucratic environment, and there are some important considerations other than clarity, precision, and grace” (12).

All of the above statements speak to Slack et al.’s reflection on the “myth of the technical communicator as engaging in an ethically and linguistically neutral activity” (33), and they put us right back to our original question of wondering what a writer has to report if the audience, generally speaking, isn’t going to read the document in the first place. And in this situation, how does the organization in which writers work affect the outcome of the document? In the next chapter, I’ll look at a specific industry/organization and analyze the effects of the documentation that its writers create, but before focusing on one industry, we should get a broader sense of writers’ reports/perceptions of organizations in general.

Though she made her comments on organizations some 30 years ago, Carla Butenhoff paints a vivid picture of how organizational politics affect the writing process. And she shows this affect by focusing on probably the simplest document at the heart of

any organization, the memo. Granted, memos and the literal paper trail that Butenhoff describes have been remediated by emails and servers, but she uses this example to clearly identify the rhetorical moves that people within large organizations make – and those moves are as prevalent today as they were 30 years ago.

In the world of memos (or emails, if you prefer) these rhetorical moves are evident depending on how writers copy others (carbon copy or blind carbon copy), when they send memos (giving praise to a subordinate as a means of reinforcing his or her lower status in the organization), or whether they write memos at all (to record and therefore justify everything that a writer does on the job) (Butenhoff 13). Without mincing any words, Butenhoff urges teachers to tell students about organizational politics:

. . . otherwise, [the students] will find themselves worrying about subject-verb-object when they ought to be considering timing, personalities, and the overall effect of their business communications” (13).

Looking at what is arguably the most culturally and historically significant instance of an organization’s influencing individuals, Steven Katz analyzes communications within the Nazi party during the Holocaust. Even though few technical writers would find themselves in situations that remotely resemble those studied by Katz, we still have a very useful concept (that of expediency) to take from his discussion:

The ethic of expediency...raises serious and fundamental questions for rhetoric. (This is especially important when so many of our decisions, so much of our discourse, both public and professional, is technical in nature, and is therefore most likely to be dominated by the ethic of expediency.)

(271)

And this notion of expediency is an underlying force in so much of what corporate organizations are trying to achieve. As citizens in consumer culture, we are inundated with communications that vie for our attention – and more importantly, our patronage. And whether watching the latest Target commercial (with cool music, beautiful people, and award-winning design and branding) or flipping through a car brochure (with high-gloss paper, high-res photos, and highly scrutinized verbiage), we get the sense that when organizations want to, they can get our attention, keep it, and more often than not, persuade us to act; otherwise, advertising wouldn't be the multi-billion-dollar industry that it is. For the business world, advertising is the ultimate form of rhetoric, and the visual aspects of this persuasion are key to exciting our senses and motivating us to act.

Even something as simple as an ad for pasta, as Roland Barthes relays in his famous mythology, is doing more than just making us aware of a product; it's conveying an essence, an attitude that the communicator wants us to grasp about the product. Though I don't teach advertising courses, I find that advertisements are excellent sources

for technical-writing students to learn some of the most basic rhetorical ploys that organizations use to persuade consumers. I also find advertisements to be rich examples of design *dos* and *don'ts*, so I always encourage students to “read” advertisements – not just as consumers but also as critical thinkers (to use a term that the university loves so).

On the opposite end of slick, expensive advertising, we would find the not-so-slick internal communications that make organizations work. These documents are what many technical communicators end up supporting, so they also deserve attention from students who are learning to master the art of effective communication. Whether working on requirements documents, use cases, site copy, or procedural manuals, technical writers most often find themselves mediating information from one internal audience to another. The glitz and glamour of prime-time ad campaigns are usually unnecessary (or unbudgeted); instead, expediency and economics are the name of the game, and an organization's need for expedient communication can erode the best of intentions or bolster the worst.<sup>7</sup>

An interesting aspect of the dichotomy between advertising and internal communications is reconciling the documents that fall between these usually distinct boundaries. For example, what of the ad-like credit card offers that the average person finds in the mailbox on an almost daily basis? In these documents, we can see elements of a high-dollar campaign (the “hook”) in one part of a document and the terms of the offer (the “fine print”) in another. Such documents serve as good case studies for students

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<sup>7</sup> See Steven Katz: “The Ethic of Expediency...”

studying rhetorical situations because they demonstrate how organizations that are capable of employing elements of effective communication and engaging design will, in the same document, ignore those principles that they just demonstrated. As I described from my years as an impressionable undergraduate, many of us have likely scoured such a credit-card offer for the APR or the terms of a promotional balance-transfer. But we probably devoted far less time to gleaning the pre-approved credit limit or the amenities that carrying the card would bring us. These pieces of information are usually quite easy to find. Assessing why companies employ such practices requires our seeing proprietary worlds to which we're simply not privy, but we could speculate on the basics:

- Perhaps the companies think that the “fine print” isn’t the most important aspect of the document. Such an assumption is supported by Kinneavy’s discussion of “surprise value” – how it’s the most important tool for organizing informative discourse. As the principle’s name implies, the information that takes on the greatest importance is the information that the audience doesn’t expect. According to Kinneavy, “the principle is to state the most important facts first...Presumably, the least important facts come last, and may even be deleted if the editor has space limitations” (160).
- Another reason for the obscured information in these documents could be that the people who work up the attractive part of the document don’t work on the nuts and bolts of the offer.
- Maybe the companies just don’t want us to read something that might make us change our minds about using their products.

- Or maybe companies believe that we don't want to know the truth about what we're reading. Perhaps ignorance really is bliss.

Granted, the notion that such practices exist isn't a revelation, but whatever the motivations that produce them, these precarious communication strategies ultimately further an organization's interests, which aren't the same as the audience's.

In the case of the credit-card offers, the organization's interests appear straightforward: get more customers, and don't draw attention to the "catch." Even the best of such companies, which at least use locating devices (like headings, font variation, and color) in their terms documents, still create "fine print" that is noticeably different from their "hooks." Tying this phenomenon to the classroom, Carolyn Miller explains how teachers of technical communication "recognize the contradiction in the familiar dilemma of having to admit to students the discrepancy between practices that are supposed to be effective and those that are actually preferred and accepted" (15).

If we assume that the executives in an organization aren't privy to the best practices for conveying technical information, we could reasonably conclude that their writers *are* (or *should be*). And the point where the content and design of a document, as envisioned by an organization, meets the technical communicator is where our concerns lie because these communicators are charged with the delicate task of mediating between organization and audience.

Looking back at my previous account of working on that terms-and-conditions document, I knew that the document we were providing to our users was unnecessarily long, difficult to understand, and almost completely unformatted. But it wasn't *my* document, and I did want to fit in with the organization. Suddenly, my rationale sounded like Carla Butenhoff's:

While it might be satisfying to a writer's ego to be precise and brief, we're not being paid to satisfy our ego but to accomplish an aim. It's not expression but persuasion. Therefore, pride of authorship has got to go.

(12)

Though it might hurt to admit, this type of thinking is a cop-out; it's lazy; it represents the path of least resistance; and it surely accounts for a great deal of the bad documentation that circles our business worlds. But this line of thinking is the product of necessity. I wonder how many writers would be willing to stake their jobs on their resolution to keep all documentation completely audience oriented and free of any "fine print." At the end of the day, most writers are going to opt for keeping their jobs, and they probably have several other projects vying for their attention anyway. Yes, I gave a *little* push back to my V.P. when she wanted me to turn out a completely writer-oriented terms-and-conditions document, but I also took my seat and returned to work once I realized my place in the organization and her resolve on the issue. Some things just aren't up for discussion in organizations, and we certainly need to choose our battles wisely. Besides, the writer isn't the sole person charged with ethical responsibility. Porter calls

on us to “insist that ethical responsibility, like a corporate document, is socially constructed and must be shared” (132). I don’t expect to conclude this section with an answer over representations of truth and the ethics that surround them, but we can use the foundation that I’ve given to move into a specific type of writing that deserves further analysis.

### The Implications of Unused Writings

In the previous section, I used the term *unused writings* in reference to a type of document that I have both observed and helped write in my career. These are documents that must be provided for legal, rhetorical, or “ethical” reasons, but either they aren’t intended to be used (who among us reads the full terms and conditions for the multitude of websites that we enter every day?) or they aren’t likely to be needed. Bazerman speaks of writing as something that is “carried on through people. People write. People read. What a text is must take into account how people actually create it and how people use it” (5). And the idea of whether people use a document leads me to the example that follows in the rest of this dissertation. To help this discussion of *implications*, as well as the questions I’ve been asking in the previous sections, we should turn to a specific example of unused writings: the safety briefings that airlines provide to their passengers. These safety communications are, for the most part, instructional documents that the average passenger will never need to use. True, these documents provide general information that passengers might refer to while on board, but the most important information, the safety and evacuation procedures, are hoped (and I would even argue *planned*) to go unused. As



the old adage goes, flying is the safest way to travel, so even though the writers of airline safety documents still have to communicate truthful information, they might be even more likely to consider the organization's preferences rather than strive for total disclosure of information by the most effective means.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the concept of rhetorical situation and the implications of its being excluded from the discussions of popular technical communication textbooks. Because the rhetorical situation encompasses so much more than analysis of the intended audience, writers must consider all of the constraints that affect them during the process of creating documents. Bazerman encapsulates this discussion by reminding us:

A rhetorical situation consists of all the contextual factors shaping a moment in which a person feels called upon to make a symbolic statement. The identification and elaboration of rhetorical problem, situation, and moment are construed by the individual through that individual's perception, motivation, and imaginative construction, although the individual's desire to gain more information about the situation, problem, and moment can lead to a more intimate understanding of these things. (8)

In Chapter 3, I begin my work with airline safety briefings, which allow us to fully understand the constraints or contextual factors that affect the way writers create documents and readers use those documents.

## CHAPTER 3: AIRLINE SAFETY BRIEFINGS – A COMPLEX OF CONSTRAINTS

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the constraints that technical communicators experience in the workplace, constraints that often result from the complex rhetorical situations in which documents are created and maintained. Having explored how the politics in and around an organization can cause writers to make decisions that aren't always in their audiences' best interests, I now focus my discussion on airlines' pre-flight safety briefings. In this chapter, I relay my personal experiences with airline safety briefings followed by an overview of government and industry assessments of these briefings. I also look at the rhetorical situation for these documents and provide examples of how organizational politics add to the constraints of creating them. After establishing why these documents are so important, and simultaneously unused, I overview some popular perceptions of these documents. While discussing the general state of these documents, I draw upon theories from Paul Norman and James Paul Gee to hypothesize methods for improving these safety briefings. I also use these theories to support the progression that airline safety briefings have taken over the last several years, shifting production emphasis from print to multimedia presentations. Finally, I set the stage for Chapter 4, in which I provide a content analysis of five airlines' current multimedia safety demonstrations.

## Getting to Know Airline Safety Briefings

Airplanes, and the airlines that operate them, have always been a passion of mine, and when I fly, I can't help but pay close attention to what I see onboard. It's all fascinating to me: I sometimes sit quietly, taking notes on the announcements that flight attendants make; I post reviews to flight-enthusiast forums about the service on particularly good (and bad) flights; and I even read the in-flight safety brochures tucked into the seatback pockets when I fly. As a child, I developed the habit of collecting these brochures because they (and anything else not nailed down inside the plane) were the trophies from my travels to visit grandma for the summer. As I grew older and continued to study writing, my motives for wanting these brochures changed. After completing my Master's program in technical writing, I began noticing that these documents were great examples of so many things that I *wasn't* supposed to be doing as a technical writer, and ever since then, I've returned to these documents for research and teaching opportunities.

People often ask me why I'm so fascinated with these brochures, and I've got two main reasons:

- First, I'm intrigued by the ways passengers react – or don't – when flight attendants ask them to review the safety brochures or pay attention to video demonstrations. Typically, I'm the only one I can see who actually takes out the brochure and reads it or who watches what's happening on the overhead video monitors. But why? Could it be that others are afraid of looking inexperienced on the plane? Perhaps they're secure in knowing that the

statistics are in their favor for not needing to evacuate the plane, use the flotation vest, or put on an oxygen mask. Or maybe they don't want to admit that the very thing keeping them high in the sky could literally come crashing down.

- The other reason for my interest in airlines' safety brochures is rooted in their design and execution. When I ask my students what they think about the brochures in my collection, I typically hear answers that contain words like *ugly*, *boring*, or (my personal favorite) *stupid*. And I often get laughs from students who are further along in their document-style and design training. They seem to take pleasure in seeing real-world documents that violate the rules that they've been working to master all semester.

But even when the terms people use for describing airline safety documents are far from technical, they tap into common perceptions of these documents that may account for why people don't like to read them. And these perceptions don't address other factors that could contribute to passengers' not reading safety brochures, such as fear of flying, the stresses of traveling, or the anxieties of living in a post 9/11 society (creating a its own set of stresses, fears, and anxieties). As a technical writer and teacher, I'm drawn to the rhetorical situation that surrounds these documents and the audiences they serve, and I want to explore this situation and the constraints that it places on writers who must work within it.

## The Significance of In-Flight Safety Documents

Anytime that I fly, I find myself asking why I often have the choice of dozens of movies and TV channels on my personal video screen (not to mention the games!), but no technologically equivalent means of learning how to effectively evacuate the plane. Why aren't the airlines improving safety documents? Some may question whether these safety documents even need improvement. How hard can it be to buckle a seat belt or find an emergency exit? Besides, aren't all plane accidents catastrophic, with the survivors being charmed folks who were in the right place at the right time? The simple answer is no.

On August 5, 2005, an Air France plane carrying over 300 passengers and crew skidded off the runway after landing in Toronto, Canada. The plane was eventually overcome with flames, which left nothing but the wings and the ashy outline of the fuselage where passengers had been sitting. As if the accident weren't noteworthy enough, incredibly, all 309 passengers and crew escaped the wreckage – with only 26 having minor injuries. Few accidents of this scale have such happy endings, but they serve to remind us of a very important fact: people do survive airline accidents. A study conducted by the NTSB revealed that 96% of passengers involved in domestic commercial aviation accidents between 1983 and 2000 survived these accidents. And while this statement seems like a proclamation of good news, we must remember that how well airlines educate passengers on safety procedures is key to increasing the number of survivors when planes do have accidents.

Even when catastrophic fires aren't involved, many planes are evacuated while sitting, intact, on the ground. In a 16-month period alone (September 1997 – January 1999), the NTSB studied 46 evacuations from commercially scheduled planes – an average of 11 evacuations per month. And of the 141 people who reported watching/reading the entire safety demonstration, only half of them said that the information was helpful to their getting out of the plane (62). So how can we get more people to pay attention to these demonstrations? And how can we use technology in a “creative and effective method” to make the information easier to comprehend and remember?

One move that airlines are beginning to make is using entertainment technology, already on many of their planes, to present safety information. But often these multimedia presentations are stale video renditions of the information contained in the printed brochures. So the airlines need to go one step further than depicting information through corporate-style training videos; they should try engaging the passenger – introduce an element of performance that gets passengers involved in what they're supposed to be learning. The safety card has become little more than wallpaper, literally a decorative fixture of the plane that passengers may see but don't necessarily notice. Airlines must add a *wow* factor to these documents in order to get passengers' attention and get them involved. And as we will see later in this chapter, some of the airlines are beginning to catch on.

## What the Government Thinks

In 2000, the National Transportation Safety Board completed a study that addressed, among other things, the effectiveness of airlines' safety briefing techniques. In their findings, the NTSB recommended that airlines "explore creative and effective methods that use state-of-the-art technology to convey safety information to passengers" (63). Yet when I look through my collection of safety brochures and videos, I see little creative difference between the content of those produced in 2008 and those produced in 1988; what's more, the technology remains almost completely unchanged: a 1- or 2-fold paper brochure stuffed into a seatback pocket (and often a video to complement that information). The fact that many airlines outsource the creation of their print documents to companies that specialize in producing safety briefings makes their static nature even more significant, while adding an additional layer of complexity to the rhetorical situation.

The direction that this conversation is taking begs for a remediation of the current safety briefings, and to a certain extent, this remediation is beginning to occur (even though the FAA mandates that print documents be available to passengers, regardless of the other methods airlines use to demonstrate safety information). Still, the airlines have control over the production of their safety cards and videos, and as we'll discuss, they are lacking. These documents are products that could be as slick as the marketing campaigns airlines use to get passengers on their planes in the first place. But most of them are far



from slick. And when airlines fail to incorporate attractive design and engaging content in their safety documents, their passengers have little incentive to pay attention.

Before getting into the specifics of current safety briefings, I want to provide a basic overview of the two governmental agencies that affect airline safety: the FAA and NTSB. Both the FAA and NTSB are key in defining safety measures for commercial aviation. As it relates to safety, the FAA “issues and enforces regulations and minimum standards covering manufacturing, operating, and maintaining aircraft” (FAA.gov 2004). On the other hand, the NTSB is responsible for determining probable cause for all US civil aviation accidents. And although the NTSB doesn’t have authority to enforce recommendations, it has established itself as a thorough and reputable investigator of aviation accidents; in the last 25 years, transportation officials have adopted 82% of its 12,000 recommendations.

And after reading reports from the last 25 years, I was surprised to see calls from within the airline industry to improve pre-flight safety briefings. Most recently, in the same study that called for “creative and effective methods” for disseminating safety information, the NTSB reiterated its findings about the effectiveness of pre-flight safety briefings:

Despite efforts and various techniques over the years to improve passenger attention to safety briefings, a large percentage of passengers continue to ignore preflight safety briefings. Also, despite guidance in the form of

Federal Aviation Administration advisory circulars, many air carrier safety briefing cards do not clearly communicate safety information to passengers. (78)

And the NTSB details how these deficiencies affect airplane evacuations:

The majority of serious evacuation-related injuries...occurred at airplane door and overwing exits without slides...Passengers continue to have problems opening overwing exits and stowing the hatch. The manner in which the exit is opened and the hatch is stowed is not intuitively obvious to passengers nor is it easily graphically depicted. (65)

In the same year that the NTSB was conducting the study from which they made their recommendations, researchers Caird et al. studied passengers' comprehension of graphics in airline safety pictorials. Caird et al. found that passengers – even those who flew several times a year – had low comprehension levels of safety pictorials. Out of 36 pictorials, most had comprehension levels below 50%, and none were above 85%, which is the American National Standards Institute suggested minimum (803). Caird et al. also noted that passengers typically “do not attend to oral or video briefings nor do they usually study the safety card in the seat pocket in front of them.” (801)

In a similar study, Silver and Perlotto evaluated 40 pictorials and found that about half met the ISO standard of 67% comprehensibility and that a quarter of them met the

ANSI 85% comprehension level. Though Silver and Perlotto found higher comprehensibility of graphics, they still stressed that, even for graphics with high (86%) comprehension, a large number of the flying public would not comprehend crucial information in life-and-death situations (806-10).

In addition, the NTSB surveyed passengers who had been evacuated from planes and reported:

The primary concern expressed by passengers was that the briefing covered situations that did not apply to their evacuation. Passengers reported that they would have preferred information regarding exit routes or information such as how to slide or how to get off of wings. Those [who] believed the briefing was helpful believed that they were more aware of the exit locations because of the briefing. (62)

Still, of the 457 passengers that the NTSB surveyed, 93% said that they had not watched/read the entire pre-flight safety briefing. Such research shows us that, even at best, instances of passengers' paying attention to and comprehending airline safety demonstrations are significantly lower than they should be.

In deciding how to present safety information, the airlines have final word on the style and design of the finished product. The FAA Guidelines are prescriptive at a high level and leave much room for interpretation. For example, the FAA states that safety-briefing cards should be "interesting and attractive so passengers will want to read them"

(5). But they don't offer suggestions for achieving these two desirable features. When I take a quick glance through my collection of pre-flight safety cards, I see that airlines' interpretations of "interesting and attractive" definitely vary. Figure 1 depicts brochure covers from three popular U.S. airlines. Of the three airlines represented, we see considerable differences in how they use available space and design their brochures. The Northwest brochure (left), for example, has a cover containing small, margin-to-margin text. Without speculating about *why* Northwest chose this design, we can see that the document is neither interesting-looking nor inviting for a passenger to read. On the contrary, the Delta brochure (right), with saturated color and the simple imperative, "be safe," creates a more engaging invitation to open the document.

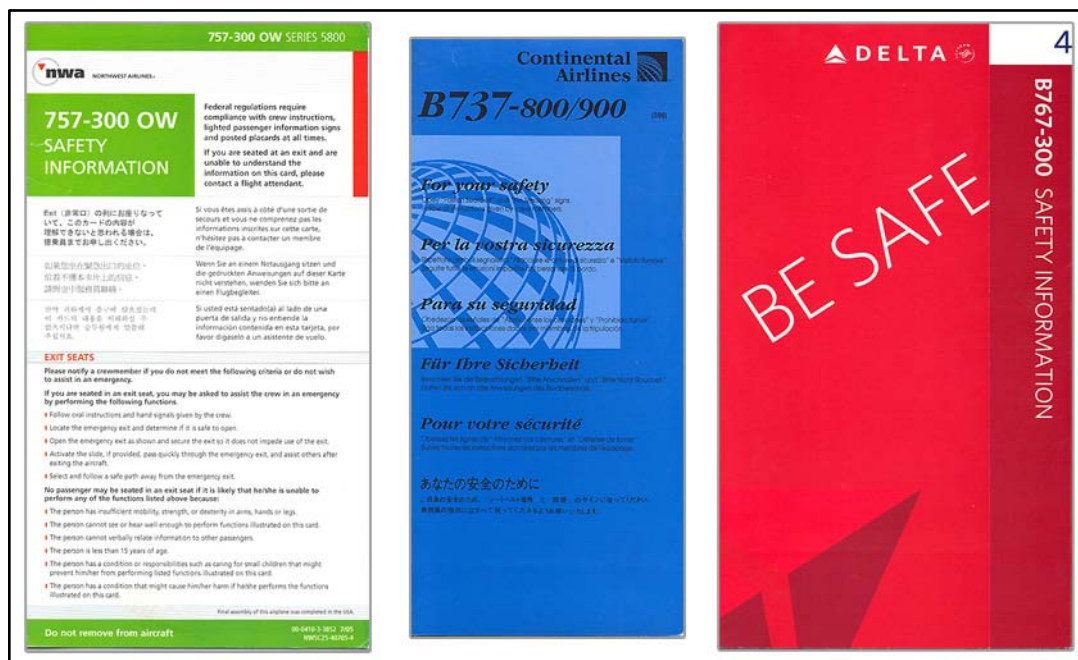


Figure 1: Three Covers from Major Airlines' Safety Brochures

Once inside these documents, we find graphic-intensive instruction, with little or no text (a practice that opposes instructional experts). A major supplier of flight safety cards, Aero Safety Graphics, Inc., emphasizes the importance of using text to accompany pictorial representations, basing its stance on a 1970 McDonnell Douglas study (see Altman et al.). But Aero Safety Graphics also says:

Ultimately, we let our clientele, who know the makeup of their passengers better than we do, determine how much text and which languages, if any, they wish to have on their cards. (2004)

Another example of the airlines' ignoring recommendations from the NTSB relates to how they depict safety diagrams. The NTSB has found that line drawings work better than photographs, yet one of the largest carriers in the world (American Airlines) consistently uses photographs in its safety cards.

Given the recommendations provided by the FAA, NTSB, and independent researchers, we see that the safety documents provided by airlines are inadequate:

- They fail to capture the passengers' attention.
- They present information inconsistently and often unintuitively.
- They fail to comply with all recommendations for imparting safety information as effectively as possible.

If we have such candid assessments of these documents, then we have to ask ourselves why these documents continue to be so, for lack of a better word, *bad*. Could it be that airlines just don't care about how they come off in these documents? Is it possible that airlines are only trying to cover the minimum government standards for producing them? Much like my previous discussion of ethics, I don't think that we should start by asking broad questions that imply explicit right versus wrong. Just because a document is lacking doesn't mean that it owes its deficiencies to unethical writers or malevolent organizations. I would hypothesize that the problem lies in the constraints (likely political) of the organizations that create these documents – that is in the complexities of the rhetorical situation.

### Understanding the Rhetorical Situation of Airline Safety Briefings

The major stakeholders who affect the safety documents that we see before us every time we fly can be categorized into four main groups:

- Regulators
- Operators
- Contractors
- Passengers

Within each of these three groups, we find more distinct roles affecting the rhetorical situation for these documents.

## Regulators

The regulators of the airline safety documents include government entities like the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).<sup>8</sup> In addition, the FAA has safety inspectors who work with the airlines and/or creators of safety documents to make sure that they meet FAA guidelines and passenger needs.

## Operators

Within the realm of operators, we find stakeholders typical of those in many large organizations. Those who can provide input and affect change in safety documents include the following:

- The airline's officers (including CEO, COO, and director of public relations).
- The legal department.
- The cabin-safety and training department(s).
- Marketing and in-flight entertainment.
- The technical communication staff (unless the airline handles that role through the marketing department and/or outsourced contractors).

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<sup>8</sup> A more substantive description of how government agencies operate follows later in this chapter.

## Contractors

Because many airlines outsource their safety documents (whether print or video), we must also consider the contracting company's internal influences on the documents. A given contractor will have its own set of executives, writers, designers, marketing staff, and legal counsel that could also affect the safety briefings that passengers see when traveling.

## Passengers

Last on the list of those who can influence the safety documents is the passengers. I've put them last because they are the furthest removed from the actual process of creating the documents (unless an airline or contractor conducts usability testing). Even though the FAA and NTSB seek passenger input after evacuations, passenger opinion seems to have a negligible effect on the products that they're given. We'll see more of how the government uses passenger input later in this chapter.

### A Cocktail of Constraints: How Organizational Politics Affect the Critique and Creation of Safety Documents

Given the number of entities involved with creating these safety documents, we immediately begin to see how creating them within this rhetorical situation requires pleasing multiple people within disparate organizations. The politics associated with so many people's working together creates constraints with each new document. And I can give first-hand accounts of how these politics work in these organizations.



## Intra-Organizational Politics

When I first began work on this dissertation, I knew that I would want to speak with key stakeholders in the process of creating these safety documents. My first move was to write letters to different airlines. Several months later, I hadn't heard from any of them, so I decided to start calling people. After multiple attempts, I found one major airline that would at least talk to me. My initial contact was with the director of marketing (the marketing staff always publishes their contact information). The person who was in charge took a few minutes to listen to my research agenda and told me that I would want to speak to the airline's director of in-cabin safety and training. I was thrilled. I didn't even know that such a title existed within that airline, and clearly this was the title for me. After being connected to the voicemail box of the in-cabin safety director, I left a brief message about my research. Within an hour, the safety director was calling me back. He sounded very interested in my research, and he expressed enthusiasm at my request for an interview. I explained that I wouldn't interview him until I had IRB approval from my university, and he replied that he would also have to seek approval on his end. Within the hour, I heard back from him; the matter of approval had been decided: I would not be discussing the airline's safety documents with the director of in-cabin safety and training (or anyone else for that matter). Apparently, he had to clear such discussions with the very marketing director who had referred me to him in the first place, as well as his company's legal department. Both Marketing and Legal felt that the information in question was proprietary and off limits, so I would have to make my

analysis without any insight from the organization. At this point, I ceased my attempts to get in touch with the airlines regarding their safety briefings.

### Inter-Organizational Politics

Frustrated with my attempt to speak with airlines directly about their safety documents, I looked to a different industry-insider for information; I contacted a company that produces these documents for major air carriers around the world. I was surprised to receive a written response from the company's president. Even though my initial e-mail only announced my research topic and requested permission to reproduce images of this company's documents in my dissertation, I received a response detailing the very constraints that I have been describing so far. The president expressed great concern over his company's being misrepresented as having "final say in what [they] produce." He continued by describing the "many misconceptions and, for want of a better term, 'urban legends' about these [documents]" and the "the idiotic seeming behavior and requirements of an FAA inspector" (Doe). The president continued to explain how just the previous week a safety inspector had mandated that a batch of cards, which were needed immediately by a client, be reprinted three times because of issues ranging from how to unbuckle a special type of seatbelt to whether the graphic of a glowing "Exit" sign appeared to glow enough. I would imagine that the expense of printing and shipping four batches of safety cards to the client was commensurate with the level of frustration that the contractor and the client felt because of the inspector's insinuations for changes. And even though the company's president was clearly willing, if not eager, to talk with me

about his experiences, he expressed concern multiple times that his company would be poorly represented in my analysis of safety documents, and he insisted on having editorial approval for any sections of my dissertation that discussed images from his documents. At that point, he had given me real-life insight into the political constraints that affect how these documents are made (and even analyzed). I didn't want to cause him further stress, and I certainly didn't want my writing to be bound by his approval. I evaluated this situation for what it had taught me and moved on. Reflecting on the above accounts of how politics work in and around the organizations that produce airline safety documents, I can only imagine how many other issues arise when all the roles for producing and adopting new documents are considered.

### Taking Airline Safety to the Streets

Having looked at what the government and industry experts think about the state of airline safety briefings, and having seen the types of politics that can affect the ways that these documents are created, maintained, and studied, I would now like to further explore the rhetorical situation surrounding these documents by looking at popular perceptions of airline safety briefings. Accounts of what the public, as well as the airline industry, thinks of these documents are readily available, and we can turn to the media for examples that demonstrate the pervasiveness of the negative attitude towards these documents.

James Wysong is a flight attendant and travel columnist, and he addresses both public and industry attitudes towards safety briefings in the title of his piece, "The safety

demo: theater of the absurd?” In his article, Wysong discusses different methods that flight attendants use for delivering information, ranging from comedy to scare tactics.

Wysong also comments on the content of safety cards:

In the seat-back pocket is a safety card that says this: If you are unable to read these instructions, please notify a flight attendant. So, let me get this straight. If you can't read the card, you should tell me? But if you can't read the card, how would you know to tell me? Oh yeah, from reading the safety card! (msnbc.com)

The first-person perspective in the above quote represents that of the flight attendant, showing that airline employees can be bothered by the same things that irritate passengers.

Shifting to the passenger's perspective, in his column for *Slate Magazine*, Cullen Murphy discusses what he calls “Airline English” and draws attention to some humorous aspects of airline lingo while making interesting observations about how this language functions:

Airline English has, in a way, become the linguistic equivalent of the worldwide nonverbal graphic system that conveys such meanings as "ladies' room," "no parking," "first aid," and "information." It is just as streamlined, just as stylized, often in the same oddly archaic sort of way...Whenever else does one hear the word "stow" being used, except as

part of the command to "stow your belongings in the overhead bins"?  
(Slate.com)

Taking the perceived absurdity of visuals in airline safety briefings to the entrepreneurial level, one person has even created a website ([airtoons.com](http://airtoons.com)) and business that sells t-shirts, posters, and original portraits, all geared at making fun of the pictorials in airline safety cards. As the site's creator, explains:

I was on a flight somewhere when I realized that the safety instructions in front of me had no captions. I thought to myself, "why is that guy's life jacket dispensing red licorice?!" So I decided to add some captions to the emergency evacuation instruction placards that everyone who flies the friendly skies is familiar with. ([airtoons.com](http://airtoons.com))

Though this take on the safety briefings is purely sarcastic, it's also relevant. Even if passengers don't really think that life vests dispense red licorice, vague visuals, can allow for open interpretations and distract readers from the message that the document is trying to convey.

And one famous commentator of airline language and safety briefings, the late George Carlin, had an entire routine devoted to the elements of safety briefings that he found most annoying. My quoting him on the topic would call for editing too many expletives, but you can see his most famous bits here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DagVklB4VHQ&feature=related>. An interesting part of Carlin's rants relate to the airlines' uses of euphemisms, a linguistic and rhetorical move that I will discuss in Chapter 4.

### Making Safety Relevant

In addition to what the government, industry insiders, and flying public say about the language and visuals used in safety briefings, up until recently airlines have simply failed to use available technology to make safety information active, engaging, and relatable to passengers. So far, the most glaring omission that I've found in safety briefings is the lack of action. Even in some videos, ironically, active instruction is missing (see Chapter 4 for a full analysis of safety airline safety videos).

In *What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*, Gee tells us that "if learning is to be active, it must involve experiencing the world in new ways" (39). Gee continues by describing the *semiotic systems* in which critical learning takes place:

Semiotic systems are human cultural and historical creations that are designed to engage and manipulate people in certain ways. They attempt through their content and social practices to recruit people to think, act, interact, value, and feel in certain specific ways. In this sense, they attempt to get people to learn and take on certain sorts of new identities, to become, for a time and place, certain types of people. (44)

When airlines ask passengers to read and comprehend safety documents and demonstrations, they are creating a semiotic system. The airlines are trying not only to get people to experience their worlds in new ways but also to temporarily become certain types of people – in this situation, attentive, thoughtful, and creative thinkers who can take information and synthesize it without (hopefully) ever having to use it.

Admittedly, airlines have passengers who belong to different cultures. This difference in readers helps us see why airlines prefer to use graphics, rather than text, as their signifiers. Graphics can be more universal than text, but airlines should not assume that the meaning one passenger creates with a graphic would be the same as those created by other passengers (especially if from different cultures). Fiske stresses this notion:

. . . it is important to remember that the signifieds are as much a product of a particular culture as are the signifiers. It is obvious that words, the signifiers, change from language to language. But it is easy to fall into the fallacy of believing that the signifieds are universal and that translation is therefore a simple matter of substituting a French word, say, for an English one – the ‘meaning’ is the same. This is not so. (44)

But when dealing with a 1- or 2-fold brochure or its video counterpart, an airline has only so many options for explaining information. Concision becomes key, and meaning may be the cost of achieving this efficiency.

### Why Aren't Pictures Enough?

A vital element of the airlines' current safety documents is pictorial instruction. Airlines prefer to rely on pictures rather than text as a means of reaching as many people as possible in as little space as possible. Wordless documentation was made popular by Patrick Hofmann, who created quick-start printer instructions for Hewlett Packard. Though his technique is still used in getting-started guides for computer equipment, other forms of instruction also supplement these documents. If a user can't figure out how to set up the printer with the quick-start document, he or she can consult the manual, call the technical-support line, troubleshoot the issue online, or ask a friend for help. In the worst-case scenario, the user won't be able to print until the problem is solved. But a passenger trying to figure out how to engage a safety slide or locate a flotation vest doesn't have the same set of supplemental resources, and the ramifications of failing to properly understand the primary instructions are significantly greater.

Bolter explains that "the appeal of traditional picture writing is its promise of immediacy...however, picture writing lacks narrative power" (59). In complex situations, pictures aren't enough. As Ong tells us, "a picture is worth a thousand words only under special conditions – which commonly include a context of words in which the picture is set" (7). Without accompanying text, many of the pictorials that airlines use become what Fiske calls *icon-index-symbols* (47). In some ways, they visually resemble what they're instructing (icon). But they also rely on cultural understanding and rules (symbolic meaning) and ultimately make direct connections to the actual objects they depict



(indexes). When encountering these sorts of graphics, a passenger cannot be certain of their meaning without prior experience or knowledge or text to help complete their meanings. Even when discussing his “Hypericonomy,” Marcel O’Gorman reminds us:

...[it] is not about throwing out our current discursive practices, but about provoking change and inventing transitional, even provisional, strategies that bridge the gap between print-centric and computer-centric practices.  
(95)

When we rely on static graphics to communicate complex information, we make too many assumptions about the people who are reading this information. According to Gee:

...to understand...any word, symbol, image, or artifact in a given semiotic domain, a person must be able to situate the meaning of that word, symbol, image, or artifact within embodied experiences of action, interaction, or dialogue in or about the domain. (24)

Though I’m amused by the airtoons.com creator’s thinking that red licorice is dispensed from life vests, another example of how a graphic without text can fail its readers comes from Silver and Perlottos’s study. When passengers were shown drawings representing various aspects of the evacuation process, they grossly misinterpreted some. For example, instead of understanding one graphic’s depiction of how the beacon light on a life vest worked:

Numerous respondents provided the answer ‘when you pull on the vest, the sun shines on your back’ instead of the correct ‘light shines in water when the tab is pulled.’ (810)

Silver and Perlotto did not explain *why* passengers answered the way they did, but we’re safe to say that the graphics were difficult to comprehend because people interpreted the same images in different ways.

### How can Airlines Bring Performance into Safety Demonstrations?

Recently, I flew on an older jetliner that had no TV monitors in the cabin (a rarity these days). Unable to play a video to accompany the passengers’ safety cards, the flight attendants had to personally “demonstrate the safety features of our aircraft.” I was surprised that they actually took life jackets out of their little packets and started putting them on – even going so far as “pulling firmly down on the back panel of the vest” and “tightening the straps as so.” This demonstration was the most in depth one I had seen in the last ten years. What made it so effective was my being able to actually *see* someone put on the life vest. One attendant even made a mistake, fumbling with the straps as she tried to secure her vest. She got a sympathetic giggle from those of us who saw, but suddenly the simple act of putting on a life vest wasn’t so simple. Here was someone who put this vest on several times a day, and she messed up under minimal pressure. What if I had to do it in an emergency? I’ve read dozens of safety cards and seen as many safety videos while onboard planes, but none of them performed the information quite like this

flight attendant. The process was not broken up in to small pictures, and there was no video editing to hurry me through the steps. I was watching a real performance. The only thing that would have been better would be the flight attendant's letting me try on the life vest for myself. But she didn't offer, and I didn't ask.

I did, however, come away from this demonstration realizing that many people have never seen these sorts of performances – let alone taken part in them. We don't know what the release handle on an exit looks like as it's moving into place; we haven't experienced the behavior of a bulky escape door slipping from its resting place on a row of seats; and we haven't had to plan a new evacuation route because the first exit we chose was blocked or broken. Short of actually having these experiences, we have a hard time understanding them completely. And since having these experiences is costly, time consuming, and potentially dangerous, we have to look to another method of experiencing them. For now, one metaphor for this performance could be a video game. I'm not envisioning *Escape from the Crashed Plane!* for X-Box and PlayStation, but more of a simulation "game" that passengers can "play" from their seats during the flight. And other people are similarly trying to engage passengers into the performance of safety. Garnet McLean is the FAA's principal safety investigator for cabin safety, and he's been looking for ways to improve passengers' abilities to comprehend the instructions "written" in safety brochures. McLean has proposed ideas from cash giveaways for passengers who pass quizzes on safety demonstrations to interactive kiosks

at airports that give passengers the opportunity to practice evacuating a plane (Condé Nast 138).

Why make demonstrations more like video games? To help people imagine what they might actually have to do in an emergency. According to Gee:

Humans are quite poor at learning from lots of overt information given to them outside of the sorts of contexts in which this information can be used. This problem can be mitigated if the learners have already had lots of experience of such contexts and can simulate the contexts in their minds as they listen to or read information. Humans tend to have a very hard time processing information for which they cannot supply such simulations. They also tend to readily forget information they have received outside contexts of actual use, especially if they cannot imagine such contexts. (113)

Aesthetically, a game-like interface has the advantages of motion, sound, and dimensional perspective over paper-based instruction. On a deeper level, a game-like interface, in which passengers have to manipulate elements in their environment and respond to deviations from ideal conditions, could help passengers imagine what they need to do in an emergency. In addition, passengers could have the ability to interact with the interface: stop it if they want to, study the environment of a particular situation, speed through or skip aspects that they've already mastered, or confirm that they've understood

an instruction by performing it. These abilities introduce a phatic element to the learning environment, one that is missing even from current live demonstrations.

Phatic elements are those that keep the channels of communication open. When a passenger reads information or deciphers pictorials, the communication is one-way; it has no elements that “confirm the communication is taking place” (Fiske 36). Fiske explains that the phatic function is “performed...by the *redundant* elements of messages” (36).

And these redundant elements are missing from current airline communications.

Passengers cannot let a video know whether they’re following its content, and flight attendants typically race through their recitations without voice inflection, eye contact, head nods or any other elements that keep the lines of communication open. And even if a passenger expresses confusion about the safety information, a flight attendant who’s trying to prepare 200 people for an on-time departure is not likely to stop his or her presentation and reiterate what the passenger has failed to comprehend.

For example airlines expect that passengers won’t have to operate the main doors of the aircraft – not just because they expect the passengers to not have to evacuate but also because they plan on flight attendants’ being available to arm and operate the doors. We can see this assumption by looking at the actual pictorials provided in the average safety brochure.<sup>9</sup> Almost without fail, uniformed flight attendants are shown operating exit doors, possibly because the doors are large, cumbersome, and more complicated to operate than over-wing exits.

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://jignutz.blogspot.com/2008/04/airline-safety-packets-joke.html>

### Conclusion: Can Safety be Attractive?

In addition to making safety demonstrations more (inter)active, we should also concern ourselves with making them more attractive. Norman emphasizes “the role of aesthetics in product design: attractive things make people feel good, which in turn makes them think more creatively” (19). If airlines can produce a new breed of safety briefings that make their passengers feel good, the passengers could be more likely to use the products and remember the information, should they ever need it. Granted, “feeling good” can mean different things. Perhaps a slick design is enough to impress someone and persuade him or her to use a product. Maybe a joke causing nervous passengers to crack a smile can alleviate their stress and allow them to pay attention to the safety information. Or maybe an interactive safety product can tear frequent flyers away from their newspapers or work during the safety briefing. Regardless of the approach, writers must provide a complete safety experience for passengers who are trying to learn safety information while onboard planes. And that experience includes making the information attractive. As we’ll see in the following chapter, some airlines are trying to address this need while others are content to deliver safety information in expected, unattractive ways.

## CHAPTER 4: ASSESSING THE STATE OF THE ART IN AIRLINE SAFETY BRIEFINGS

### Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the safety briefings that airlines provide to their passengers. In conducting my analyses, I examine the safety documents through two lenses:

- Technical Communication
- Visual Cultural Analysis

These lenses are important because, together, they encompass key aspects of creating documents that audiences can successfully use. The technical communication lens leads us, as writers, to reflect on our choices not just for how we compose sentences but also how we think about agency in the documents that we create. By also applying the lens of visual cultural analysis, we invite further reflection on our roles as writers and agents of change in the readers' lives. When discussing safety briefings from the vantage of a technical communicator, I will consider Joseph Williams' principles and techniques related to writing style. And to analyze the documents' visual rhetorics, I will apply an amalgam of visual and cultural analyses from Philip Bell, Martin Lister and Liz Wells, and Victoria O' Donnell. This chapter allows an exciting application of my work in Texts and Technology because I can employ a multidisciplinary approach to evaluate a set of documents that has, so far, evaded such analyses. Because the print document is being increasingly supplemented with video versions of safety briefings, and because video

briefings are technologically enhanced versions of traditional texts, I will focus my analyses on the video documents. As I discuss the video briefings of airlines in this chapter, I use a sampling of five airlines: Delta, Continental, United, Virgin America, and Virgin Atlantic. I will discuss these airlines and my reasons for choosing them later in this chapter.

### Methods for Delivering Safety Information

Let's begin with a historical and logistical context for the current state of airline safety briefings. Paper safety briefings have been a staple onboard commercially operated aircraft for decades, and the ones that we see today are largely the same as they were 20 years ago. Having collected these documents from my early years as a traveler, I can look through my personal collection to see that what the airlines gave passengers in 1988 is strikingly similar to what they provide in 2008. Most airlines have abandoned photographs for line drawings or computer renderings, and the general trend has been to fit more information on each page of the documents. Much like those in the 80s and 90s, today's printed safety briefings come in the form of laminated, cardstock brochures that rely heavily on pictorials to convey information. Despite this sameness of the print documentation, airlines are exploring video briefings to make the safety information more engaging and useful to passengers. For example, in the spring of 2008, Delta Airlines garnered national media attention because of its new video briefing and associated viral-marketing campaign.<sup>10</sup> But just because one airline is actively trying to

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<sup>10</sup> A full analysis of Delta's video follows in this chapter.



improve the image and content of its safety briefings doesn't mean that the others are following suit. Some of the largest airlines in the country still adhere to their old methods, effectively ignoring the direction that the industry is trying to take these briefings.

Before dissecting the safety briefings, we should consider the methods that airlines use to impart safety information. For example, within any given airline, aircraft of different sizes, ages, and configurations are used to transport the same passengers. Accordingly, varying technologies are available for conveying safety information on these aircraft. A passenger flying from a small city in the Midwest to Orlando may be routed through one or two hubs along the way. Typically such a passenger would travel from his or her hometown to the airline's nearest hub on a regional jet or turbo-prop ("puddle jumper").

Today's regional aircraft are essentially the size of private jets and provide an economical alternative to the airlines' costly pre-deregulation practice of flying larger aircraft to smaller markets. Larger aircraft cost more to maintain, consume more fuel, and require larger flight and ground crews. If you remember flying in the 70s and early 80s, being on a half-empty plane wasn't uncommon, and if you wanted more room to stretch out, you could just move to an empty row and flip up the armrests. If you've flown in the last few years, particularly since the hard times that hit the airlines after 9/11, then you know that planes are typically full. Flight attendants seldom make the "we have a very full flight today..." announcement because full flights (even oversold ones) are the new

norm. Airlines have tailored their aircraft fleets to meet capacity and cut the number of flights to match demand. For 2008, U.S. airlines are expected to cut capacities by 9% (CNNmoney.com). Smaller capacities, coupled with record-high fuel prices, mean that airlines and passengers alike are absorbing greater costs for getting from A to B.

Generally speaking, the smaller the aircraft, the less technologically enhanced the safety briefing. None of the major U.S. air carriers has video technology on its regional aircraft, which are typically staffed with one flight attendant, responsible for administering the safety demonstration via the public-address system. But even on these aircraft, airlines are beginning to provide flight attendants with pre-recorded audiotapes of the safety briefing. This policy makes the workload for the lone attendant more manageable, while promoting consistency of information across flights. Either way, the demonstration is of the low-tech variety, but it's also the only one that the passengers have. Passengers are encouraged to review the safety cards provided by the airline for much of the information. The average safety card has little written information and is packed with pictorials, so passengers may be forced to receive complex instruction by listening to the flight attendant's announcements and/or pre-recorded briefings. Still, airlines are investing more money in planes that have video technology and are accordingly spending more on video briefings. In this analysis, I have chosen briefings from five airlines that represent five points along a continuum of current video presentation styles to provide a complete picture of the briefings on the market.

## Overview of the Airlines Featured in this Style Analysis

I will discuss the same five airlines for all analyses that I conduct in this chapter. Because printed safety briefings don't provide adequate text for significant stylistic analysis, and because airlines are devoting more resources to producing video briefings, I will limit my analyses in this chapter to the video briefings that the following five airlines provide to their passengers. I begin by introducing the airlines and their video styles for briefing passengers on safety information.

### Continental

Continental is one of the largest airlines in the United States and is regularly recognized for its innovations in customer service. Continental's current safety video depicts safety information with live actors onboard real aircraft. The narrator never appears on screen, and the overall look and feel of the video is reminiscent of a corporate-style training video. The briefing uses basic production techniques, resulting in a briefing not unlike those produced ten years ago. I haven't been able to obtain a high-quality recording of Continental's briefing, but amateur videos of the briefings are available on YouTube. One of these recordings can be viewed here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOBecus74rU>

### Delta Airlines

Delta Air Lines has recently gotten a good deal of press for its new safety videos that it released in spring of 2008. For the first time, a U.S. airline is trying to brand its

safety demonstrations, and they have been well received. In fact, Delta released the video on YouTube before even putting it onboard their aircraft. Within the first 30 days of being online, the video had already received more than 300,000 hits. Thanks to Delta's pride in their new product, a high-quality version of the video can be viewed here:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgpzUo\\_kbFY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgpzUo_kbFY)

### United

United, once the largest airline in the world, still dominates the U.S. West coast and international routes to the Pacific. The presentation style for United's briefing is an amalgam of production techniques, using live actors, computer images, and line drawings. Similar to another airline in this study, United portrays passengers in an open-air cabin. Chairs, equipment, and people float in and out of the scenes depending on the information that the on-screen narrators are presenting. The United video discussed in this chapter can be viewed here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_raz1vzvpw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_raz1vzvpw)

### Virgin America

Virgin America is a new domestic-only airline that started service in August 2007. Like its older international sibling, Virgin America seeks to provide travelers with fun service onboard fashionably appointed planes (first class has fully reclining, *white* leather chairs). In keeping with many of the technological advancements that passengers enjoy on Virgin America, the airline's creators have also provided its customers with an avant-garde safety demonstration using fantasy-like cartoon characters. Virgin America's

briefing can be viewed here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyygn8HFTCo&feature=related>

### Virgin Atlantic

Since its inception, Virgin Atlantic has been the airline of choice for fashionistas who need to get from England to destinations around the world. The airline makes an interesting component of this case study not only because of its animated briefing style but also because of its presence in the Orlando travel market. Because of the strong British pound, tourists from the U.K. flock to central Florida more than ever. And with just a few daily visits from its jumbo jets, Virgin Atlantic can ferry as many passengers to Orlando as some of the domestic airlines that come and go all day long. Virgin Atlantic's briefing can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR4dxPISegY>

With introductions out of the way, I'd like to begin the task of analyzing how these airlines are presenting information and how those presentations affect passengers' perceptions and uses of these documents. I will begin by reviewing the writing style that appears in the briefings.

### Technical-Writing Style and Safety Briefings

Until now, typical analyses of airline safety briefings have come from usability experts or governmental agencies trying to gather metrics on how easily passengers can decipher and recall evacuation instructions. These groups have also tested passengers' abilities to comprehend the information contained in the briefings' pictorials and have

contrasted their findings with usability benchmarks for acceptable levels of comprehension in similar fields.<sup>11</sup> Assessing these documents from the standpoint of usability makes good sense, but this practice leaves out the role that the writer takes in planning, designing, and – more importantly – writing the information; therefore, an equally logical lens to apply when looking at these documents is that of technical communication – especially as it relates to writing style. I’ve seen little discussion of safety briefings from the standpoint of the technical communicator’s choices in writing style, so this lens has the opportunity to inform the study of these documents in an important way. Of course, current printed safety briefings have all but eliminated text from their instructions; so in order to apply Williams’ style techniques to airlines’ safety briefings, I look beyond the traditional print documents and examine the texts contained in the video briefings.

### Passive Instruction: The Essence of Flight Safety

On a recent flight to Texas, I experienced a first: I heard a flight attendant give her safety briefing in the same “writing” style that students would learn in one of my classes (a style in direct contrast with what I normally hear while traveling). Though the information was the same as what any other flight attendant would offer, this attendant’s speech stood out because it was so easy for me to follow; it was conversational. When I say conversational, I don’t mean that it was informal or casual. On the contrary, her choice of words sounded as rehearsed and professional as I’ve heard on any flight, but

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 3 contains a review of these studies.

she broke all the rules that I imagine flight attendants must learn when they go through their training. For example, she used only one instance of passive voice in her entire safety briefing (and it was a justified instance), and she also made a point to use personal pronouns such as “I, we, and you.” The effect was a streamlined monologue, free of the verbal baggage that would accompany the usual passive voice, nominalized verbs, and subjects without actors. The alternative style of presentation, on which I frequently take notes, involves attendants’ getting lost in the convoluted sentence constructions that they utter. Awkward pauses can be common as the flight attendant gathers his or her thoughts, and even simple grammatical mistakes conspire to derail the importance of the information being communicated.

Returning now to the flight attendant who grabbed my attention with her clear and direct safety briefing, let me offer an example of how she differed from her colleagues. When we board an aircraft, we’re allowed to use our mobile phones, laptops, and MP3 players until the crew closes the door to the plane. At that point, we have to turn everything off, and only after the plane reaches an altitude of 10,000 feet (signaled by the two dings that you hear a few minutes after taking off), may we use *approved* portable electronic devices. Because I fly so often and pay such close attention to the announcements, I can recite, with a certain degree of accuracy, the way that many flight attendants would impart this information to passengers. It would go something like this:

The use of cell phones and 2-ways pagers is permitted while parked at the gate. Once the main cabin door has been closed, all devices must be turned

off and stowed for the duration of the flight. Once we've reached a safe altitude, you will be advised when the use of approved devices is permitted. A list of approved devices may be found at the back of the [Magazine Name] magazine, located in the seat pocket in front of you. [Magazine Name] magazine is offered complimentary to all passengers, and you are invited to take your personal copy home with you today.

Using a style that directly opposes that of the above passage, the flight attendant I was observing delivered the same information more along these lines:

You can use your phones and other portable electronics while we're boarding. I'll tell you when you must to turn them off. After we reach a safe altitude, I'll tell you when you may use approved devices, such as laptops and iPods. We have a full list of approved devices at the back of the [Magazine Name] magazine. Your personal copy of this magazine is in the seat pocket in front of you.

Looking at the above versions of the *approved devices* speech, we see that the second version is shorter, more direct, and closer to the conversational prose that many of us might use if we were talking to a friend. While in flight, I had the opportunity to speak with the flight attendant who'd given the briefing, and I commented on how her announcements sounded so different from what I usually hear. She said that her coworkers frequently tell her that she has "great *PAs*" (Public Addresses), but she wasn't



sure why they thought so. To me, the reasons were obvious because her briefing did the following:

- It employed active voice.
- It avoided nominalized verbs.
- It used first person and second person (instead of third).

At no point did she tell me something that allowed for an ambiguous reading of her message. I knew what she would do and when, and I knew what she expected me to do.

And aside from her stylistic choices, she also spoke deliberately and calmly, explaining information without resorting to the rushed speech and random up-and-down pitch inflections that are common with other flight attendants. But the tone of her voice was subordinate to her superior method of constructing sentences, so I will now take some time to understand how the style of airlines' safety briefings can either bolster or betray the content of those messages.

### Methods for Deconstructing the Language of Safety

In this section, I will conduct a style analysis of transcripts from the safety briefings of five major airlines. Four of the airlines are international carriers, and one is strictly domestic. I chose the airlines because they make for a diverse group of companies. Not only do they operate noticeably different planes, but also they have distinct styles for presenting their safety demonstrations.

### Method: Analyzing Writing Style

To conduct my style analysis, I use two works from Joseph M. Williams:

- His article, *How can Functional Sentence Perspective Help Technical Writers Compose Readable Documents?*
- His book, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*.

Williams' writings are ingrained in the canon of technical communication programs and campus writing centers across the country. For my analysis of the selected airlines' safety demonstrations, I focused on the following stylistic elements:

- Clarity
- Concision
- Functional Sentence Perspective
- Writer-Orienting Language/Information

### Method: Assessing Clarity

Clarity describes style elements that let the reader know what is happening in a sentence and who is doing the action. Clarity is essential when writers are crafting instructional information because readers need to know when/whether they should act. When imparting safety to information to passengers, clarity is the most important stylistic convention that a writer can employ. I evaluated each safety briefing for clarity by reading it twice for each of the following problems:

- **No actor** – Describes a sentence that has no actor in its subject position *or* a sentence that has no actor at all. A sentence without a clear actor forces the reader to decide who or what is acting. In making such decisions, the reader may have to reprocess the text, slowing the act of extracting pertinent information, or the reader may make an incorrect assumption about who should act.
- **Passive Voice** – Passive voice either obscures or eliminates the actor in a sentence because the object of the sentence’s action appears in the subject position. Passive voice makes sentences unnecessarily long and may cause readers to misinterpret the implied actor in the sentence. Especially where safety instructions are concerned, if a reader misinterprets who will complete an action, valuable time could be lost and people could be injured or killed.
- **Nominalizations** – A nominalization is an adjective or verb that the writer uses as a noun. Nominalized verbs lose their action and, when placed in the subject position of a sentence, obscure or eliminate actors. In addition, nominalized verbs and adjectives add to the overhead of sentences because they need additional words to function. For example, I might use an adjective to comment, “The font in this document is *legible*.” If I were to nominalize my adjective, the construction of the sentence would become something like, “The *legibility* of the font in this document is good.” In making such a choice, I’ve added literally bigger and more words to the sentence. When receiving

information about procedures for evacuating an airplane, readers would benefit from instructions that convey information as succinctly as possible.

### Method: Assessing Concision

Williams describes concision as “the first grace of style” (Style, 140), and he uses concision to eliminate unnecessary words. Because “unnecessary words” can be a vague and subjective term, I evaluated concision in the five airlines’ briefings by looking for stylistic errors that commonly produce unnecessary words. The main issues of concision that I focused on (simply because most of the others from Williams’ list weren’t present in any of the documents) came from Williams’ discussion of metadiscourse. Writers use metadiscourse to state their intentions, refer to their readers’ responses, and structure their documents (Williams 151). Metadiscourse is writing that does any of the following:

- Belabors the obvious – states something that the reader can infer from the text.
- Announces/Highlights the topic – announces what the writer is about to say.
- Attributes ideas to a source – announces something that has been anonymously observed.
- Narrates unnecessarily – announces the writer’s opinion when it is not needed.
- Hedges – weakens the writer’s claim (e.g., *appears*, *seems*, *may*, *usually*, *almost*).
- Intensifies – makes the writer’s claim sound too authoritative or bold (e.g., *very*, *pretty*, *all*, *major*).

To assess metadiscourse in the safety briefings, I read each briefing for each of the above issues related to metadiscourse and recorded my findings.

### Method: Assessing Functional Sentence Perspective

According to Joseph Williams:

Functional sentence perspective allows writers to arrange information systematically and generalizes that writers should, whenever possible, prepare their readers for new information by beginning their sentences with a “topic,” or idea that is familiar to the audience or that has already been referred to, and then moving to the “comment:” newer, less predictable, less familiar information. (Style 91)

Once writers have appropriately ordered the information in their documents, they can help their readers focus on this information (improve coherence) by leading them through passages with well-defined topics. The order of information in and between sentences deserves close attention, but even more so when the writers are creating aural documents. Audiences of aural documents, just like those of print documents, need organizational cues to help them make sense of the information. In addition, the writers of these documents must consider the ways that they chunk information – keeping all related information as close together as possible (in the same “paragraph”) and using functional sentence perspective to weave that related information into cohesive, useful parcels that readers can unpack with minimal effort. To evaluate the functional sentence

perspective of the briefings, I read through the scripts while noting the relation between topic (old) and comment (new) information. I also noted the relation of sentences' grammatical subjects with the paragraphs in which they were located. If a topic appeared outside of its original paragraph without an appropriate transition, I counted it as a new comment that wasn't properly introduced. Because first-time and frequent fliers experience the same documents, I assumed only basic topics of information as existing in the common knowledge of the passengers.<sup>12</sup> Still, these common concepts had to appear in the documents via proper functional sentence perspective and had to be grouped together within paragraphs organized by topic sentences. After marking the documents according to my rules, I counted the number of "violations" per document and recorded them.

#### Method: Assessing Writer-Oriented Language

Writer-oriented language involves a writer's using words, jargon, or idiom that readers don't know. This offense can also include writing that eliminates necessary information (because the writer doesn't realize that the reader needs it or because space doesn't allow for it) or that forces readers to go to another source for the rest of the information. In safety briefings, writer-oriented language could either confuse readers or leave them with incomplete information because they may not have the time or motivation to seek additional sources.

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<sup>12</sup> I assumed certain topics as common knowledge, including *electronic devices, cell phones, exits, windows, doors, life vests, passengers, we, you, flight attendant, smoking, seat, and seat belt*. These topics still had to be properly situated in the topic-comment order described in this section.

## Results of the Style Analysis

With Williams' principles in mind, I marked multiple copies of the transcripts according to a style sheet that I created (with color codes for each stylistic issue).<sup>13</sup> I then counted the numbers of problems that I found for each element of clarity and recorded the data. In discussing my analysis, I arrange my results according to stylistic issue rather than document. Table 3 provides a general overview of each briefing.

Table 3: Overview of Five Airlines' Video Briefings

<b>Airline</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>No. of words</b>	<b>No. of sentences</b>	<b>Avg. words/sentence</b>
Continental	4 min. 19 sec.	680	47	14.5
Delta	4 min. 30 sec.	778	55	14.2
Virgin America	4 min. 13 sec.	653	49	13.3
Virgin Atlantic	5 min. 29 sec.	664	54	12.3
United	4 min. 14 sec.	665	48	13.9

### Results: Clarity

Of the five videos that I analyzed, Delta's had the greatest number of flags for clarity. Eighteen of the 41 total flags related to clarity in Delta's video came from instances of passive voice. As for the individual criteria for clarity, Continental had the

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix A for a sample of the document mark-ups.

most instances of passive voice (21), and Delta had the most instances of subjects without actors (15) and nominalizations (8). Table 4 summarizes the issues that each briefing had related to clarity.

Table 4: Issues Related to Clarity for Safety Briefings

Airline	Element of Clarity	No. of Issues	Example (issue <i>italicized</i> )
Continental	Passive voice	21	“The night locator light can <i>be illuminated</i> by pulling the pull-to-light tab.”
	No actor	9	“ <i>A change in color or an exit sign</i> will indicate you have reached an exit.”
	Nominalization	3	“...the <i>use</i> of approved electronic devices...”
Delta	Passive voice	18	“Your mobile phones and other electronic devices should <i>be turned off</i> .”
	No actor	15	“ <i>There</i> are six exits on this plane.”
	Nominalization	8	“A water <i>evacuation</i> is also unlikely.”
United	Passive voice	19	“If additional flotation <i>is needed</i> ...”
	No actor	11	“ <i>U.S. law</i> also requires passengers...”
	Nominalization	3	“In an <i>evacuation</i> ...”
Virgin America	Passive voice	8	“The vest can also <i>be inflated</i> by...”
	No actor	6	“ <i>There</i> is also a path of white lights...”
	Nominalization	2	“...used for <i>flotation</i> if necessary.”
Virgin Atlantic	Passive voice	15	“Adult life jackets must only <i>be inflated</i> when...”
	No actor	9	“ <i>Your life jackets</i> can be found...”
	Nominalization	2	“...gives full information on the <i>operation</i> of...”



## Results: Metadiscourse

Among all five airlines, hedges and intensifiers were the two most common occurrences of metadiscourse. Delta led the group with 16 hedges in its briefing, and Virgin Atlantic had the most intensifiers, also at 16. All five airlines had at least one instance of belaboring the obvious, and this issue was typically related to describing the rules against tampering with smoke detectors. Table 5 summarizes the issues related to metadiscourse in the five airlines' safety briefings.

Table 5: Issues Related to Concision for Safety Briefings

Airline	Element of Concision	No. of Issues	Example (issue <i>italicized</i> )
<b>Continental</b>	Belabors	4	<i>...tampering with, disabling, or destroying</i> these systems.
	Hedges	10	...the nearest exit <i>may</i> be behind you.
	Intensifies	15	<i>...highest</i> quality customer service...
	Narrates	8	<i>...we</i> know that <i>we</i> have to earn your business...
<b>Delta</b>	Belabors	1	<i>...tampering with, disabling, or destroying</i> restroom...
	Hedges	17	<i>Just in case...</i>
	Intensifies	11	<i>All</i> carry-on items...
	Narrates	9	Before <i>we</i> depart, <i>we'll</i> be showing...
<b>United</b>	Belabors	1	<i>...tampering with, disabling, or destroying</i> smoke...
	Hedges	5	You <i>may</i> be required to assist the crew...
	Intensifies	8	<i>...your complete</i> attention...
	Narrates	4	<i>We</i> appreciate...

Airline	Element of Concision	No. of Issues	Example (issue <i>italicized</i> )
<b>Virgin America</b>	Belabors	2	To be safe...
	Hedges	13	Not only does it have <i>pretty</i> pictures...
	Intensifies	6	... <i>everyone</i> is required...
	Narrates	2	<i>We</i> recommend...
<b>Virgin Atlantic</b>	Belabors	2	<i>You are about to see our safety information video.</i>
	Hedges	16	<i>In the event of</i> reduced visibility...
	Intensifies	16	...it's <i>expressly</i> forbidden...
	Narrates	2	<i>We</i> ask you all to please study the safety card...

Of the issues that the briefings had with metadiscourse, hedging is the most problematic where understanding safety information is concerned. Though intensifiers, unnecessary narrators, and belaboring information add overhead to sentences, they don't preclude meaning; however, hedges can exist in varying degrees, and some of those instances could lead passengers to question how to act in an emergency situation. Here are some examples of how hedges work in these documents:

- Using the ubiquitous phrase “your nearest emergency exit *may* be behind you” hedges technical information about the aircraft.
- Repeatedly telling passengers that a situation is *unlikely* hedges its relevance to the passengers and negates its being included in the briefing.

- Telling passengers where life vests are located in *some* cases hedges not only on technical information but also the airline’s credibility as a reliable source of information.

### Results: Functional Sentence Perspective

The results for issues related to functional sentence perspective are summarized in table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Issues Related to Functional Sentence Perspective in Airline Briefings

<b>Airline</b>	<b>No. of sentences</b>	<b>No. of FSP issues</b>
Continental	47	18
Delta	55	10
United	48	12
Virgin America	49	7
Virgin Atlantic	54	11

Continental had the highest number of issues with functional sentence perspective in its briefing. Of the 18 issues that I identified in Continental’s document, 10 came from the instructions related to locating and using exits and flotation devices. Table 7 provides examples of these problems from each airline’s briefing. In the column next to each problem, I have provided a revision. In each problem and revision, the topic information appears in *italics*, and the comment information appears in **bold**. In the “problem”

column, the comment text falls immediately around the punctuation separating each sentence (indicating that new information at the end of one sentence is followed by more new information at the beginning of the next). In the “revision” column, the comments are moved closer to the ends of the sentences, indicating a more functional sentence perspective. In the revision column, I have intentionally left instances of passive voice or other stylistic errors from the original passages to focus attention on the effect that functional sentence perspective can have on a text.

Table 7: Problems and Revisions Related to FSP in Airline Briefings

Airline	FSP Problem	FSP Revision
Continental	<i>The window exits are <b>equipped with a ramp and off-wing slide</b>. A <b>life raft is located in an over-head bin</b> at the over-wing exits.</i>	<i>The window exits are <b>equipped with ramps and off-wing slides</b>. At each window exit, you’ll also find a <b>life raft in the over-head bin</b>.</i>
Delta	<i>Each door has a <b>detachable slide that can be used for flotation</b>. <b>Life rafts are located in ceiling compartments</b> at the front and center of the plane.</i>	<i>Each door has a <b>detachable slide that you can use for flotation</b>. In addition to these slides, we have <b>life rafts in the ceiling compartments</b> at the front and center of the plane.</i>
United	<i>A life vest equipped with a water-activated light is <b>located under or near your seat</b>. It can be <b>identified by a red tab</b>.</i>	<i>A life vest equipped with a water-activated light is <b>located under or near your seat</b>. The life vest is in a <b>pouch with red tab on it</b>.</i>
Virgin America	<i>The vest can also be inflated by <b>blowing into the red tubes at both shoulders</b>. A <b>water-activated locator light</b> is attached at shoulder level.</i>	<i>You can also inflate the life vest by <b>blowing into the red tubes at both shoulders</b>. Just below the red tubes, you’ll find a <b>water-activated locator light</b>.</i>
Virgin Atlantic	<i>Your life jackets can be found either <b>under or between your seats</b>. Please <b>refer to your safety card</b> for the exact location. <b>Break the seal to remove it from the bag</b>.</i>	<i>You can find your life jackets either <b>under or between your seats</b>. For the exact location of your life jacket, please <b>refer to your safety card</b>. To open the life jacket, <b>break the seal on the top of the bag</b>.</i>

## Results: Writer-Oriented Language

The frequency of writer-oriented language in the safety briefings was low, but those instances typically involved generalizations or omissions of information – sometimes that passengers would have no way of figuring out on their own. The majority of airlines used writer-oriented language to address configuration inconsistencies across their fleet. Though single-sourcing information for technical documents in large organizations is certainly well practiced in industry, it should never be at the expense of the readers’ receiving accurate information, especially where the reader’s safety is concerned. Table 8 summarizes the instances of writer-oriented information in the airlines’ safety briefings.

Table 8: Writer-Oriented Language in Airline Briefings

<b>Airline</b>	<b>No. of Writer-Oriented Issues</b>	<b>Example (<i>with reader-oriented questions that the issue raises</i>)</b>
Continental	2	Your life vest is located in a container beneath, or in some cases, between each seat. ( <i>Where is my life vest?</i> )
Delta	6	Also, most seat cushions can be used for flotation. ( <i>Which ones can’t? How can I tell the difference?</i> )
United	2	In the event of water landing, main-door slide rafts detach from the airplane and are used for flotation. ( <i>How do I deploy the rafts? How do I detach them?</i> )
Virgin America <sup>14</sup>	4	If this happens, pull one of the masks down to your face, and cover your nose and mouth. ( <i>What</i>

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<sup>14</sup> The Virgin America briefing employs a writing style that I’m inclined to regard as writer oriented: sarcasm. The narrator speaks to the passengers as though he is telling

Airline	No. of Writer-Oriented Issues	Example ( <i>with reader-oriented questions that the issue raises</i> )
Virgin Atlantic	2	<p><i>do I cover my nose and mouth with?)</i></p> <p>Please refer to your safety card for the exact location [of your life vest]. (<i>Why can't you tell me now where my vest is? Where is my safety card?</i>)</p>

After completing a style analysis of a document as common as the safety briefing, we begin to see how we can think, as writers, to consider not just the reader's need for information but also the ways that we provide that information. Unfortunately, the issues that we've seen in the preceding documents are at work every day in safety briefings. In addition writers who try to stem such problems through writing-style may receive opposition from their organizations. Still, we have a powerful tool in conducting simple analyses like these to support recommendations for change. Williams' methods allow us to quantify the issues that are often explained only with imprecise qualifiers like *wordy* or *vague*. But that's not to say that we should abandon our qualitative analyses of technical documentation. In the next section, I discuss a writing issue that goes beyond this quantification of style.

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them something for the hundredth time. He expresses frustration and contempt for the passengers' lack of knowledge, and the overall effect is offensive if not simply irritating. See the discussion of the focus-group session at the end of this chapter.

## Euphemism: An Issue Beyond Style

Williams' writings provide an effective framework for conducting a style analysis of the airline safety briefings. But by the time I'd finished my analysis, some of the airlines' writings that seemed suspect were still slipping through my methods for coding. After looking at these dubious statements more carefully, I realized that they were related to hedges, only more subtle. Rather than weakening the writer's claims, these words were "sugarcoating" serious concepts; they were euphemisms.

Simply put, a euphemism is a deceptive or vague way of describing something. For reasons that become quickly apparent, we may prefer to call something by a name that's easier for us to cope with or that just sounds nicer. We don't always want to explain something thoroughly to an audience, and they may not always care anyway. For example, I have friend who calls alcoholic beverages *grown-up drinks* when she's in front of her kids. For her, euphemism is born out of necessity. My friend either doesn't want or doesn't feel the need to explain to her children what alcohol is, how it affects the body, and why people might like to consume it. She merely wants her children to know that such drinks aren't for them, and *grown-up drink* gets the point across. Aside from curbing underage drinking, parents have other needs for euphemisms because (much like airlines) their primary audience is one with limited experiences and knowledge as well as one that may become easily alarmed if a more blunt explanation is used.

Recently I read an article entirely about how parents can deal with the embarrassment of getting caught during sex by their children. The authors recommended

both verbal and visual euphemisms – from explaining that mommy and daddy are enjoying *alone time* to engaging in a *tickle fight* should they ever look up from the throes of passion and see little eyes staring at them from across the room. I was impressed with some of the authors’ tactics, but the most interesting part of the article was that it advocated exhausting all avenues of euphemism before explaining to the children what’s really going on in the bedroom. And given the awkward alternative of explaining what happens when “two people are in love,” I suspect that many parents would follow the article’s advice.

But parenthood isn’t the only opportunity for employing euphemisms in our lives. Euphemisms are everywhere. When organizations eliminate jobs, they *downsize*; when people die, they *pass away*; and when governments torture prisoners for information, they *interrogate*.<sup>15</sup> Euphemisms flourish in our vocabularies to the extent that they become the accepted terms for the things that they once tried to smooth over. Whether using the *restroom* (toilet), staying at a hotel with *accessible rooms* (designed for *handicapped* (crippled) people), or visiting a *gentlemen’s club* (a bar that features female strippers), we’ve made a common-place art form of conveying the less attractive parts of our lives in much more attractive ways.

Given the previous examples of euphemism, we might infer that the act of making something sound nice isn’t necessarily bad. Say, for example, I live in a part of town with

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<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth example of the comingling of these two terms, see McCoy. And for other examples of political doublespeak, see Dovring.



a *gentlemen's club*. Even if I don't pick up on the signifiers of what goes on in this establishment (there are usually some obvious ones in the outdoor signage), the worst thing that the *gentlemen's club* euphemism could do to me is offend my sensibilities if I unwittingly venture inside one night. Likewise, there's little harm in calling alcoholic beverages *grown-up drinks*. In fact, there's a good deal of truth to such nomenclature. But what about when we're communicating ideas more important than strip clubs and alcohol? And what if a euphemism becomes so genteel that the thing it represents is no longer acknowledged – or at least not to the extent that it should be? In the following section, I will look at euphemisms as they pertain to risk communication by examining their roles in the safety documents that airlines provide to their passengers. Because these documents use multimedia, I will analyze them for euphemisms of the verbal, visual, and aural varieties.

### A Crash by another Name: Euphemisms in Risk Communication

In 2003, Gwyneth Paltrow and Christina Applegate starred in *A View from the Top*, a feel-good movie about a group of wanna-be flight attendants trying to make it through training at the prestigious and fictitious Royalty Airlines. The night before a big safety test, Applegate's character, Christine, proclaims in a fit of exasperation: "Who cares, anyway, what to do in a water landing? They don't land in the damn water. They crash!" (*A View from the Top*) This observation is as honest as it is comical. It's also one that her roommate, Donna Jensen (played by Paltrow) would never make. Donna is the ideal flight attendant – the new millennium's incarnate Pan Am *stewardess* of the 1960's.

She's posh, polished, and always polite. On the contrary, Christine is the bad girl who embodies so many of the flaws from which Donna is exempt. Christine is also the one who cheats on the very test that has her so stressed, ousting Donna from her rightful place as top attendant. In this story, it's fitting that the "bad girl" would be the one to debunk the most famous airline euphemism: the *water landing*. It's also worth noting that this euphemism is alive and well in real airlines' briefings, so I'd like to spend some time understanding how euphemism, whether verbal, visual, or aural, works in these documents.

The problem with using euphemisms when communicating risk is that we potentially skew a person's entire point of reference. I've heard the term "water landing" more times than I can remember. And in my mind's eye, there has always been some way for an airliner to land on the water. Even some of the safety cards used by airlines contain icons depicting a plane, approaching water as though it were making a controlled landing on solid ground. It wasn't until 2000 when I saw *Cast Away*, starring Tom Hanks, that the notion of a "water landing" became exposed for the euphemism that it is. I won't go into the details of what Hanks' character endures in the movie, but seeing it will likely give you a different mental model of what "landing" a plane on the water really means.

Euphemism in the verbal form can be both blatant and subtle, and it stands to reason that technical communicators may be more adept than the general population at identifying these verbal niceties. But even experienced communicators need to thoroughly examine visual documents for instances of euphemism because we are

inundated with tricks of various trades to make things look better than they really are. In her book, *Weeds in the Garden of Words*, Kate Burridge talks about a pervasive form of visual euphemism:

The visual euphemism can be a lot more sneaky. Pleasing packaging is a type of visual euphemism. Emphasis is on appearance, not product. Special lighting effects that redden meat, the waxing of fruit, pretty containers – these are all cosmetic, and like their verbal counterparts they create a positive illusion. They say, I’m tasty, I’m tender, I’m creamy, I’m juicy, I’m bigger than I really am. (177)

Much like the packaging that Burridge describes, communicators of risk set out to let their audiences know that their products are somehow better than they really are. Only instead of convincing users that they offer the tasty, big, or juicy, communicators of risk must convey notions such as safety, confidence, reliability, and honesty. Still, they must be careful not to misrepresent those values through euphemism. As Burridge reminds us,

It’s all dishonest, of course. But so is any euphemism. Think about it – in a given context, something that is taboo can be acceptably spoken of using a euphemism, but not a direct term. (176)

In the five airline safety briefings that I analyzed, I found multiple instances of euphemism that accomplish these dishonesties. To help convey the overall use of

euphemism in each of the documents that I studied, I organize this discussion by three types of euphemism: verbal, visual, and aural.

When I began this analysis, I expected to find more instances of verbal euphemism, but instead, I found that visual euphemism was more common. Because airlines are moving toward a video-based method of presenting safety information, visual euphemism affords more ways for airlines to make safety briefings look pleasing to their passengers. Similarly, airlines are now able to consistently incorporate sound effects and music into briefings, providing them more opportunities to explore sound as a means of making safety information more palatable. In the following sections, I discuss the euphemisms that I noticed in the airlines' safety briefings after repeated viewings. Because of the fluid nature of analyzing audio and video, my methods for discussing euphemisms in these documents is more qualitative than in the style analysis of the documents.

### Verbal Euphemisms in Airline Safety Briefings

#### Continental

Continental's briefing contains only a few verbal euphemisms. One of the most common euphemisms in airline briefings, the *water landing*, is absent. The narrator makes no mention of evacuating the plane while it's in the water; instead, she explains the slides, rafts, and life jackets and leaves the passengers to determine the implications of having that equipment onboard. The most common instances of euphemistic language

in Continental's briefing occurs through passive instructions, which advise passengers of things that should *be done* rather than tell passengers what *they* should do.

### Delta

Delta does a good job avoiding the most common verbal euphemisms. Whereas some airlines talk about *water landings*, Delta speaks of *water evacuations*. And instead of telling us to keep our seatbelts fastened for *your safety*, Delta says that we may encounter *unexpected rough air*. The euphemisms that do occur are more related to stylistic choices, such as passive voice. Such euphemisms involve telling passengers what should *be done* as opposed to telling passengers what to do. Overall, the verbiage of Delta's safety briefing is straightforward and without sugarcoating.

### United

United falls prey to some of the typical verbal euphemisms found in these safety briefings. For example, *water landing* is used to describe the occasion that would necessitate passengers' using flotation equipment. United also resorts to passive constructions for telling passengers what should *be done* without having to instruct them directly.

### Virgin America

Virgin America's safety briefing is arguably the least verbally euphemistic briefing that I've studied. The most glaring verbal euphemism is the narrator's use of the term *water landing*; otherwise the narrator is blunt to the point of being offensive. He

speaks with noticeable sarcasm, which is peppered with sighs of boredom, and we almost get the sense that our wanting the safety information is an inconvenience to him.

#### Virgin Atlantic

In Virgin Atlantic's safety briefing, information is communicated verbally via two narrators, a man and a woman who both speak with posh British accents. They take turns explaining information throughout the briefing and utter only a few verbal euphemisms. For example, telling passengers that they can *top up* their life vests by blowing into the tubes at shoulder level is really just a nicer way explaining how to blow up a life vest if it fails to inflate or springs a leak. The narrators also explain what a passenger should do in the event of *reduced visibility* – that is in the event that the plane loses electricity or is filled with smoke. Finally Virgin Atlantic's briefing uses verbal euphemisms much like the other airlines by employing passive voice to politely explain what should be done rather than directly instructing passengers on what to do.

#### Visual Euphemisms in Airline Safety Briefings

##### Continental

The first, and most glaring, visual euphemism in Continental's briefing is its introduction. The scene opens on a well-dressed businessman sitting in an empty first-class cabin with clean, blue leather seats and soft lighting. Within seconds, we learn that we are having a private audience with the company's president and CEO, who launches into a fifty-second introduction to the airline. He discusses the airline's philosophy on

improving products and services, feeding us at meal times, and earning our business on a daily basis. While he talks to us, we see images of airplanes gracefully taking to the air, helpful employees providing what must be excellent customer service, and clean-as-a-whistle mechanics methodically maintaining aircraft. At the end of the CEO's speech, we see a large jetliner soaring above a beautiful, cloudless, landscape.

Now we begin the safety demonstration. As the narrator of the briefing describes the safety features of the airplane, we see actual exit signs, seatbelts, and aircraft cabins. But the camera shots are tight, so we're not privy to typical distractions on a plane that is preparing for departure, such as crowded cabins or people struggling to force their baggage into the overhead bins. The next series of visual euphemisms begins when the narrator talks about the airplane's emergency exits. The scene cuts away to a simple line drawing of the plane's fuselage. As a means for locating the exits relative to major features of the plane, this technique is a good choice. But passengers are offered no actual views of emergency exits, nor are they shown how to operate an exit. True to the industry, Continental is putting forth the idea that passengers don't need to bother with the actual look and feel of an emergency exit.

The briefing then returns to the line drawing of the airplane and its exits while the narrator begins talking about onboard flotation equipment. As the narrator describes where to find and how to don a life vest, we see two passengers sitting calmly, putting on their vests in unison without hesitation or mistake. After seeing our passengers put on life vests, the scene cuts way to a flight attendant standing on the threshold of an open door

stoically demonstrating how to inflate the vest. We see no evidence of other passengers waiting behind him, nor do we see the slightest suggestion of the water on which the plane has just “landed.”

As is required in any of these briefings, the narrator directs passengers to review information in the flight-safety card. Rather than showing passengers locating and opening the card, we see a picture of the card’s cover along with a montage of images from the card randomly scrolling by. Much like the beginning of the briefing, the video ends with another shot of a beautiful airplane flying over beautiful landscape.

Overall, the Continental briefing uses visual euphemism in an expected way: the airplanes are clean and crowd free, the passengers are well dressed and attentive, and emergency scenarios are peaceful and well performed. Despite the depiction of its aircraft, employees, and passengers, Continental still provides a bland and somewhat-dated-looking world. Everything from clothing to hairstyles misses the mark on representing current travel conditions. It’s as though Continental took its safety cards from the 90s and turned them into a video.

### Delta

As opposed to a corporate feel-good message, Delta opens its video with a different visual euphemism: the steady and trustworthy captain of the plane.<sup>16</sup> As he turns

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<sup>16</sup> Though I don’t analyze gender roles in these briefings, I can’t help noticing that traditional gender roles are perpetuated throughout some of these videos. For example, the introduction to Delta’s briefing is provided by a male pilot who is sitting in the left-



from the controls, he briefly welcomes us on board and asks us for our full attention. We are then greeted by who has become known as “Deltalina,” Delta Airlines’ glamorous new flight attendant. Deltalina presents a world that has rarely been depicted in a flight safety briefing. The plane and all of its passengers and crew are beautifully lit and shot. But that’s not to say that they’re unrealistic. Instead of presenting a flat, two-dimensional safety card brought to life on film, Delta uses conventions such as lighting, shadow, and perspective to represent a real plane as we might see it. We see our Deltalina standing at the long end of a barreled fuselage with a packed audience before her. Granted, the people are still well dressed and politely poised in their seats, but the effect is more realistic than the automatons that appear in other briefings. As with its verbal cues, Delta still presents us with visual euphemisms, such as happy people thoughtfully attending to well-dressed, well-lit flight attendants. In addition, this briefing depicts crewmembers completing procedures, such as putting on a life vest, with extreme ease and precision. Despite the value of seeing a flight attendant demonstrate how to put on a life vest, seeing him do so while standing in the aisle of a plane, as everyone else sits by calmly, feels less than authentic. Many of us have experienced the “elbow wars” that can ensue within the cramped confines of a jetliner. I can only imagine the violations of personal space that would result from 200 people’s trying to put on life vests at the same time.

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hand seat of the flight deck (the captain’s seat). At the end of the video, we receive a quick “thank you” from a female pilot, sitting in the right-hand seat (the co-pilot’s seat).

### United

The passengers depicted in United's briefing are sitting in a virtual cabin, with no defined dimensions, creating an overarching visual euphemism of the conditions inside the airplane. I call this representation a euphemism because the airline is making an intentional move to misrepresent the actual environment of the aircraft. Rather than sitting within the confines of a fuselage, passengers are superimposed in front of a dreamscape backdrop that features an omnipresent company logo. The effect is surreal and a gracious departure from the actual conditions on board any airliner. Despite this euphemism, United breaks away from visual niceties that other airlines in this study cling to. For example, instead of relying on minimalist line drawings to convey the location of emergency exits, United provides detailed computer renderings of the aircraft – even going so far as to include the aircraft's tail number at the back of the fuselage. Though such computer renderings are more useful than basic line drawings, United overuses them when demonstrating procedures like operating emergency exits. Instead of showing an actual person opening an actual door, a lone computer-generated door floats and curiously rotates in the ether while its handle operates without human intervention. The effect is so refined that people watching the demonstration may disconnect from the information being presented and wonder whether any effort is needed to open the doors. The importance of seeing visual information in its true context is explained by Elaine Lewis:

Features within a picture are not seen in isolation. They are considered within the larger "context" of the picture as a whole. Moreover the entire

picture is considered within an individual's experiential and cultural context. Perceived context of a picture and how we assign meaning to that picture from memory are important considerations for documentation designers. (236)

#### Virgin America

The most significant visual euphemism in Virgin America's briefing lies in its being completely animated. The style of animation is unique because everything is drawn as though an artist were free-handing it with a pencil. Most of the passengers who we see on board look like characters from a fairy tale (one man has a fish head), and no two of them look alike. Despite this style of animation, the visual information offers realistic representations through lighting, perspective, and detail, and the location and depiction of cabin features is one of the most detailed of the entire group of briefings.

#### Virgin Atlantic

For its briefing, Virgin Atlantic uses animation techniques that fall somewhere between South Park and Saturday morning cartoons, and the style is less detailed than Virgin America's. Because of this choice, the entire briefing becomes a visual euphemism. Aside from the euphemism that its style of briefing creates, Virgin Atlantic also risks making information less recognizable to passengers by relying on cartoon characters to present information.

Some early perceptual research implied that line drawings with exaggerated features, “cartoons,” are more easily recognized, but later work contradicts this notion. (Lewis 239).

But even within this overall euphemism, other techniques conspire to create a document that is full of other visual niceties. For example, the cabin of the aircraft constantly changes to suit the needs of the instruction. Chairs and passengers appear from nowhere and disappear just as quickly when they’re no longer needed. Even when one of the passengers is demonstrating when and how to inflate a life vest, the airplane disappears and reappears so that he is *standing* outside of the plane. We don’t see his finding or negotiating an exit, and he is standing outside of the plane, not floating as one might expect in a water evacuation. Also because of the style of animation used, vector-drawn cartoons, we have little point of reference for gauging how accurate the information actually is. And because of the way the cabin is depicted, we don’t get a sense of the airplane’s actual layout – let alone our relation to emergency exits and equipment. What’s more, at the point in the briefing where we should be seeing available exits, the narrators instruct us to turn our attention to the actual flight attendants who are (we hope) pointing out emergency exits. I’m not sure whether this omission constitutes euphemism or laziness on the part of the writers, but the document is so thoroughly produced in all other aspects that the authors must have deliberately chosen to exclude this information from the visual presentation. In the absence of an explanation, this omission reads as euphemism. To clarify how omission of visual information can be euphemism, we can

turn to Merriam-Webster, which tells us that euphemism substitutes “an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant” (merriam-webster.com). In this the case, the unpleasantness of a passenger’s actually seeing a detailed depiction of where he or she will need to evacuate is substituted with the inoffensive action of flight attendants’ (who may not even be visible from a passenger’s seat) pointing to doors throughout the cabin.

### Aural Euphemisms in Airline Safety Briefings

#### Continental

The first aural euphemism is found in the briefing’s soundtrack. A generic ditty of simple piano chords and a slow-paced drum kit plays quietly in the background. Much like the dated look of the passengers, the music is characteristically out of sync with current trends. Over top of the music, the narrator speaks calmly and clearly with little voice inflection, reinforcing the serenity of the passengers’ environment. Aside from the lilting music and polished narrator, we hear no other sounds that match the action on the screen. The producers of the film have chosen for us to experience only the sights of the safety demonstration. There is no metal click of the seatbelts being fastened, no *ding* of an activated no-smoking sign, and no audible trace of the passengers’ interacting on the plane. The absence of these sounds is in itself an aural euphemism. Rather than hearing the plane as it really is (for better or for worse), we are merely observing what could just as well be a silent film.

### Delta

For its safety briefing Delta also uses aural euphemisms. The film opens with a “chill” soundtrack that beats gently in the background throughout the demonstration. But unlike the Continental video, the musical soundtrack gives way to cabin noises such as flight attendants talking with passengers, seatbelts clicking, and cell phones chirping when turned off. These types of noises, though possibly recorded in a studio and mixed into the soundtrack, lend authenticity to the environment being depicted in the briefing and remove the “absence of sound” euphemism that other airlines employ.

### United

The auditory euphemisms in United’s briefing are confined mainly to the music, which is a jazzy rendition of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Since the 1980s, United has used this song as its signature in advertising campaigns, so hearing it in the briefing is expected. In this situation, the airline is using music to create positive associations with the situation and reinforce corporate branding. As is customary with these sorts of videos, the narrators are calm to the point of being sedate. Granted, instructional information of this sort should be delivered calmly, but a more conversational tone might help audiences pay better attention to the people addressing them.

### Virgin America

Compared to other briefings, Virgin America’s presentation contains virtually no auditory euphemisms. The only music appears at the opening title sequence and stops

before the narrator begins speaking. Instead of music, a quiet whoosh of air plays in the background as sounds from the passengers and cabin supplement the activities of the briefing.

#### Virgin Atlantic

Auditory euphemisms in Virgin Atlantic's briefing are similar to those found in Delta's. The briefing begins with a lush, down tempo track, which was produced by a popular recording artist in England. This music denotes a sense of calm and sophistication that almost borders on aloofness, but I hadn't considered this music (or any for that matter) as a euphemism until after conducting a focus-group session on these briefings (discussed later in this chapter). During the focus-group session, a participant commented that the music was too "smooth" and that it did not support the seriousness of the information that is being conveyed to passengers. I was surprised by this observation because I felt that the music was actually very good and thought that it might help engage passengers who hear it.

Also like Delta's briefing, Virgin Atlantic's employs sound effects to replicate some of the noises that we would hear in the plane's cabin. One aspect of aural euphemism unique to this briefing is the tone that the narrators use when speaking. At times, particularly with the male speaker, the tone of the narration approaches that of someone flirting with us. When I played this video for a focus group, one participant commented that the narrator was "trying to seduce" her. The best example for this observation occurs when the male narrator tells us how to slip a life jacket over our

heads. The narrator's voice *is* sensual, and the effect of hearing him explain safety information in this manner is a departure from the expected seriousness of the message's content.

### Visual Rhetoric in Safety Briefings

The other lens that I want to apply to my analysis of the safety briefings is visual rhetoric. Because most of what airlines tell passengers in their briefings happens visually (independent of text), I want to closely examine the visuals that are put before passengers – in a way that goes beyond document design or usability. Assessing the usability of the visuals is important, but the meanings that those visuals create, aside from communicating tasks that passengers must complete, are equally important to comprehend. Barbara Mirel explains how usability results, even if positive, can still fail to represent a document's true value:

...current usability tests are insufficient for evaluating if a manual successfully achieves its organizational purposes. High marks on such tests for clarity, comprehensibility, and task-orientation are no guarantee that a manual will actually be valued by users as a source of information or function to dissipate organizational conflict and uncertainty. (279)

If a document is putting forth images that convey a calm, serene user environment, the user might actually expect to find that representation in real life. And if documents don't authentically represent the audiences' actual contexts, they might ignore them.



In discussing reviews of movies and television shows, Herbert Zettl comments:

...rarely, if ever, do these critics mention the specifics of lighting, picture composition, the continuity of shots, and the role of sound effects. This is understandable, because such media-aesthetic factors work mostly underground. (365)

Much like Zettl's comments about film critics, experts who have studied the effectiveness of flight-safety documents have stopped their critiques short of the aesthetic qualities of the documents. As Zettl points out, the aesthetic qualities we're speaking of go beyond mere beauty and the pleasure that we derive from looking at these documents; instead, we become concerned with what he calls applied media aesthetics, which deals "primarily with how static and moving-screen images and sound are structured for maximally effective communication" (365).

When an airline communicates safety information to its passengers, those messages are packed with information that goes beyond mere safety. An airline is also sending messages to passengers about the perceptions that it wants those passengers to have. Whether telling passengers that "safety is the top priority" or showing images that convey how important passengers are as customers, airlines make rhetorical moves of several types in their briefings. These messages can have a significant effect on how passengers view such documents and could ultimately decide how or whether passengers use them.

Acknowledging Zettl's observations, I first complete a content analysis of specific scenes from five airlines' safety briefings, looking at elements of the scenes' compositions. I base the content analysis on Philip Bell's method as described in *Content Analysis of Visual Images*. After taking stock of major technical and stylistic elements of the briefings, I conduct cultural analysis of the briefings by applying cultural-studies questions from Martin Lister and Liz Wells as well as Victoria O'Donnell. My goal in making this move is to show how the aesthetics' "underground" meanings take root in the documents and present broader implications that can ultimately affect how/whether passengers view safety documents.

### Content Analysis of Safety Briefings

Bell urges researchers conducting content analysis to start with clear hypotheses. My hypotheses about airline briefings are consistent with those that I've heard and read from many people. In short, airline safety briefings are lacking because:

- They're dull.
- They fail to engage the passenger.
- They don't represent the real conditions on an airplane.

But statements like these are subjective, and we need a way of quantifying them so we can assess current safety briefings and ultimately make recommendations for improving them. Following Philip Bell's method for visual content analysis, which draws

upon the works of Kress and van Leeuwen, I will identify values and variables that speak to the above hypotheses and allow me to evaluate current airline safety briefings.

### Method: Defining Values and Variables

As Bell explains, “the concepts of variables and values are critical to an understanding of the procedure” (15) for conducting visual context analysis, so I will begin by defining the values and variables for my analysis of safety briefings. To test my hypotheses about safety briefings, I will look at the following:

- The interaction between the viewer and the authority figure (gaze of the authority figure).
- The social distance between the viewer and the characters (in effect defining the amount of the environment we’re allowed to take in).
- The depiction of the environment (style/genre of video).
- The visual modality (representation of color).
- The aural modality (representation of sounds).

#### *Variable 1: The interaction between the viewer and the authority figure*

The value of how the narrator interacts with the viewer has the following variables:

- 1.1 The authority figure looks directly at the viewer and smiles.
- 1.2 The authority figure looks up at the viewer, creating a vector of submission with the viewer.

- 1.3 The authority figure looks directly at the view and doesn't smile.
- 1.4 The authority figure looks down at the viewer, creating a vector of authority with the viewer.
- 1.5 The authority figure is present but does not look at the viewer.
- 1.6 The authority figure is not shown.

*Variable 2: The social distance between the viewer and the characters*

The variable of social distance has the following six values (Bell 29):

- 2.1 Intimate (face or head only).
- 2.2 Close personal (head and shoulders).
- 2.3 Far personal (from the waist up).
- 2.4 Close social (whole person).
- 2.5 Far social (whole person and surrounding space).
- 2.6 Public (torsos of at least four people).

*Variable 3: The depiction of the environment*

The depiction of the environment speaks to the presentation style or the actual media used to create the scene. With regard to flight safety briefings, the depiction of the environment has the following values:

- 3.1 Real (real people in real environments).
- 3.2 Real with computer enhancement (real people depicted in computer enhanced/created environments).

- 3.3 Real with cartoon enhancement (real people depicted in cartoon/artistically enhanced environments).
- 3.4 Computer animation (digital renderings of people and environments).
- 3.5 Cartoon animation (cartoon drawings of people and environments).

*Variable 4: The visual modality*

Visual modality, according to Bell, is “the represented ‘realism’ of an image, given the sensory coding orientation, based on degrees of color saturation” (30). Visual modality has the following four values:

- 4.1 High (uses highly saturated, natural colors).
- 4.2 Medium (less saturated or washed out).
- 4.3 Low (monochrome).
- 4.4 None (no visual – audio only).

*Variable 5: The aural modality*

Aural modality represents the realism in sound, such as cabin noises and passenger movements. It does not include the presence of the narrator’s voice (a constant in every safety briefing), but it does account for the presence of background music. Aural modality can have the following four values:

- 5.1 High (sounds from the environment accompanied by music).
- 5.2 Medium (sounds from the environment without music).
- 5.3 Low (music only).

#### 5.4 None (no audio – visual only).

##### Method: Assigning a Score to Each Briefing

In this analysis of the five airlines' safety briefings, I use three representative clips, which account for the different types of information that passengers receive from a briefing:

- The welcome message.
- The description of rules regarding smoking.
- The instructions for putting on and using life vests.

I have chosen these clips because they allow me to map my hypotheses against the briefings when I conduct the content analysis. But because each clip presents a different type of information, the values for each variable must be ranked according to the type of information being presented. For example aural modality (whether cabin/passenger noises are heard) has a different significance in an evacuation sequence than a welcome message. To arrive at a consistent method for ranking these values, I did a card-sorting exercise with one focus-group member, whom I asked to prioritize the values within each variable depending on the type of information he/she might be receiving in the safety briefing.<sup>17</sup> Table 9 summarizes the variables with the coded

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<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this ranking, I simplified the descriptions of the message contents to *welcome*, *rules*, and *instructions*.

values. Table 10 summarizes the perceived *ranking* for each coded value according to the type of information being presented.

Table 9: Five Variables with their Coded Values

Variable	Code	Value
<b>1 Interaction of authority figure and viewer</b>	1.1	Direct gaze with smile
	1.2	Looks up at viewer (submission)
	1.3	Direct gaze without smile
	1.4	Looks down at viewer (dominance)
	1.5	Present but doesn't look at viewer
	1.6	No authority figure shown
<b>2 Social distance</b>	2.1	Intimate
	2.2	Close personal
	2.3	Far personal
	2.4	Close social
	2.5	Far social
	2.6	Public
<b>3 Depiction of environment</b>	3.1	Real
	3.2	Real with computer enhancement
	3.3	Real with cartoon enhancement
	3.4	Computer animation
	3.5	Cartoon animation
<b>4 Visual modality</b>	4.1	High
	4.2	Medium
	4.3	Low
	4.4	None
<b>5 Aural modality</b>	5.1	High
	5.2	Medium
	5.3	Low
	5.4	None

Table 10: Perceived Rankings of Coded Values According to Type of Information

Variable		Welcome	Rules	Instructions
<b>1</b>	<b>Interaction of authority figure and viewer</b>	1.1	1.1	1.3
		1.2	1.3	1.4
		1.3	1.4	1.1
		1.4	1.5	1.5
		1.5	1.6	1.6
		1.6	1.2	1.2
<b>2</b>	<b>Social distance</b>	2.2	2.3	2.3
		2.3	2.4	2.4
		2.1	2.2	2.5
		2.4	2.5	2.6
		2.5	2.1	2.2
		2.6	2.6	2.1
<b>3</b>	<b>Depiction of environment</b>	3.1	3.5	3.1
		3.2	3.1	3.2
		3.3	3.3	3.3
		3.5	3.2	3.4
		3.4	3.4	3.5
<b>4</b>	<b>Visual modality</b>	4.1	4.1	4.1
		4.2	4.2	4.2
		4.3	4.3	4.3
		4.4	4.4	4.4
<b>5</b>	<b>Aural modality</b>	4.3	4.1	4.2
		4.1	4.2	4.1
		4.2	4.3	4.3
		4.4	4.4	4.4

Using the above rankings, I created a table for each of the fifteen video clips in my analysis (three clips for each of the five airlines). I then watched each clip and identified the values that were present for the five variables. Because each variable had



between four and six values, I weighted the values by distributing them equally across a 100-point scale. For example if a variable had four possible values the most desirable received 100 points, the second-most desirable received 80 points, and so on. After watching and coding the fifteen clips, I was able to give each an overall percentage grade by averaging its value scores. I could then average each of three grades to arrive at an overall grade for that airline's briefing.<sup>18</sup> I was also able to grade the industry (based on my sample of airlines) according to any of the variables by averaging each of the fifteen clips' scores for a given variable (e.g., if I wanted to know the average score for visual modality in all clips, regardless of airline or type of information). Similarly, I could grade the industry in each of the three information types according to the average scores (e.g., grading the five *welcome* messages). Deciding which correlations are interesting is strictly up to the questioner, but for the purposes of evaluating my three hypotheses, I processed the data as follows.

First, I averaged each airline's three scores (one for each film clip) for the five variables. I then calculated overall average scores for each variable based on the scores from each airline. Finally, I ranked the five variables according to each hypothesis that I was testing. The rankings were based on my perception of the variable that most affects the hypothesis in question. For example, I think that aural modality is least likely to affect whether a briefing is engaging, whereas presentation style is most important. Table 11 provides my rankings of the variables according to my hypotheses.

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix B for the full data from the content analysis.

Table 11: Rankings of Content Variables According to Hypotheses about Flight Briefings

		<b>Hypotheses</b>		
		<b>Dull</b>	<b>Unrealistic</b>	<b>Not engaging</b>
<b>Rank of Variable</b>	<b>5</b>	Pres. Style	Pres. Style	Pres. Style
	<b>4</b>	Visual Modal.	Social Dist.	Narrator
	<b>3</b>	Narrator	Aural Modal.	Visual Modal.
	<b>2</b>	Aural Modal.	Visual Modal.	Soc. Dist.
	<b>1</b>	Soc. Dist.	Narrator	Aural Modal.

Based on my rankings (5 being most important and 1 being least important), I multiplied each overall average for a variable by its corresponding ranking number. I then added the results of the adjusted averages and divided that number by 1500 (the total possible number of adjusted points for the five variable averages). I multiplied this result by 100 to arrive at a final percentage score for the industry relative to each hypothesis. Table 12 provides an overview of the weighted score for each hypothesis.

Table 12: Weighted Scores of Safety Briefings Relative to Hypotheses

		<b>Hypotheses</b>		
		<b>Dull</b>	<b>Unrealistic</b>	<b>Not engaging</b>
<b>Final score</b> (out of 100)		58.5	58.3	58.6

I found that the hypotheses hold true based on the content analysis for the five airlines' flight briefings. (Scores below 60 certainly aren't good.) Though confirmation of my general hypotheses isn't surprising, I found interesting results by looking at each

airline's overall score. If I average each airline's overall scores based on its performance in each variable, the airlines fall into the following ranking:

1. Delta and United (tied with 84 points)
3. Virgin Atlantic (64.8 points)
4. Continental (61.1 points)
5. Virgin America (39.9 points)

I expected Delta's video to be near the top of the list, but I didn't think United's would fare equally well. And even though the narrator of Virgin America's briefing irritated me to no end, I felt that this briefing was more detailed and informative than Continental's.

### Limitations of the Study

Though I was glad to see that my personal preferences for the briefings didn't come through the analysis, the method that I've demonstrated isn't without its flaws. For example, I could have introduced more variables to yield a more detailed analysis of the briefings. Also, the study involved at least two instances where passenger perceptions were needed to code a ranking system, and my samples were convenient and small. Having a larger group of people rank the values for each variable would have helped hone the accuracy of information. Finally, I was the person who viewed all of the video clips once the values had been ranked. The analysis would have greater repeatability if the video scenes were tagged by multiple viewers and their inputs aggregated. For its

faults, the method still gets us closer to quantifying the attributes of airline safety briefings. In Bell's words,

Especially in the analysis of visual texts, content analysis should be seen as only part of the methodological armory that a researcher can employ.

(34)

In the next section, I return to qualitative methods for continuing this analysis of airline safety briefings.

### Understanding the Material Qualities of Safety Briefings

To better understand the messages that are packed into an airline's safety briefings, we can conduct cultural analysis of the elements contained in video safety briefings in much the same way that Martin Lister and Liz Wells do for photographs in *Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies As an Approach to Analyzing the Visual*. According to Lister and Wells, "Cultural Studies is interested in the enabling and regulating institutions, and less formal social arrangements, in and through which culture is produced, enacted and consumed" (61).

### Context of Production

Lister and Wells encourage us to think about the context in which the image has been produced. The safety briefings are produced under even stricter regulations than those that govern the ways that passengers view them. Airlines have no choice about

whether they provide these briefings, and they have little choice about their content (though presentation style is more open to interpretation). Passengers may not know the regulations that necessitate these briefings, but the sheer pervasiveness of the briefings indicates that they are required or at least permanently ingrained into the ritual of flying.

### Context of Viewing

Lister and Wells also ask us to consider where the image resides, both in the social and physical world. They also ask us to consider why the viewer is looking at the image, what information the viewer seeks, and how the viewer is intending to use the image. A viewer who seeks an image, such as by traveling to a museum and paying for admission to the collection, has a different power relationship with the image than a person who is required to view it in a textbook.

When traveling on a commercial airline, passengers are not required to view the images in safety briefings, but the airlines are required to present them. They also must talk about and demonstrate certain procedures, such as fastening seatbelts and putting on oxygen masks. The delivery of such information is mandated to the extent that if a passenger is late and boards an airliner after the safety demonstration has taken place, the flight attendants must repeat the entire demonstration for the person who missed it the first time. Even though an airline can't force its passengers to pay attention, we should recognize the context of viewing for what it is:

- Passengers are strapped (literally) into the situation of receiving the safety messages.
- Passengers are asked by various members of the crew to pay attention to the briefing.
- The PA system is turned up so that the audio portion of the briefing overpowers other noises on the plane.
- Flight attendants stand silently throughout the cabin as a visual cue that passengers should be doing nothing other than paying attention.
- Talk of “federal regulations” and “passenger compliance” reinforces all of the above.

The context of viewing for these documents is a rigidly contrived one, and if we described it and the sequence of events that led up to the viewing, without any references to planes or passengers, the scenario would sound rather oppressive:

You and 179 other people will walk, single file, slowly down a long corridor. At the end of the corridor, you will enter a long, narrow room with 30 rows of six chairs. Each person in the group is assigned a specific chair, and you may access your chair only from the aisle that splits each row of six chairs into two groups of three. Once you find your seat, you must sit down and strap yourself to the seat with a belt that you fasten with a metal buckle. Once everyone has found his or her assigned seat and fastened the provided seatbelt, a proctor will use an intercom system to

direct everyone's attention to TV monitors hanging from the ceiling. On the monitors, a film plays containing rules that you must follow while seated in the room and information that's necessary to get out of the room in case of emergency. You will only get to view this film once.

If a person were to read the above description for the viewing of this film, he or she might think of a prison-type situation (or maybe *A Clockwork Orange*). Appropriately enough, when I asked participants in a focus group<sup>19</sup> to draw pictures about their perceptions of airline safety briefings, one person drew what appeared to be a window with four panes of glass. When I asked this person about the drawing, she told me that she felt like she was in prison when viewing these briefings on the plane.

Now that we're talking about the passengers' experiences within the context of viewing, I turn to Victoria O'Donnell's method for conducting visual cultural analysis of documents. Her questions are interesting because they help inform the discussion of how visual elements of the document respond to the culture of people using it.

### Applying O'Donnell's Method to Safety Briefings

At the end of her discussion on visuals and cultural studies theory, Victoria O'Donnell provides a list of questions to help us understand the cultural messages in visuals. In the following sections, I look at Victoria O'Donnell's method for visual cultural analysis. My discussion is organized by the following five questions:

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<sup>19</sup> Discussed in the last section of this chapter.

1. How does a work relate to the shared living condition of the time?
2. What is present and what is absent?
3. How are we limited in our ways of seeing?
4. Can we place ourselves in the image, identifying with it?
5. What meanings are preferred by the work? (536)

### How Does a Work Relate to the Shared Living Condition of the Time?

The “shared living condition” of the time is an interesting aspect of commercial airline travel. Just eight years ago, if you were taking a trip, a friend or loved one could escort you to the gate and see you off for your flight. If you had a lighter or pocketknife with you, you wouldn’t be searched or forced to abandon those possessions before getting through security. In a nutshell, we were a pre-9/11 society. No one knew of commandeered planes crashing into buildings or color-coded security alerts issued by the government. The major drawbacks to flying commercially were likely related more to economics and deregulation (benefits to the consumer) more than anything else. Planes still had accidents, airlines came and went, but little more was at stake. Then, literally overnight, we became a nation obsessed with safety. Should pilots carry guns? Could airlines give out metal utensils when they served meals? Should every piece of luggage that enters the hull of an airplane be x-rayed? The answers to these questions came quickly, and with few surprises given the environment in which we found ourselves. And while we might not have gun-wielding pilots flying overhead, we do have a changed societal condition that includes:



- Terror alerts/threats.
- Heightened attention to safety issues.
- Frustration and inconvenience involved with security screenings and flying in general.
- Aggravation in dealing with oversold, overcrowded planes.

The above list underscores just a few of the shared conditions of flying, and most of them are difficult to identify visually. But even if we choose one, the fact that most airlines operate on the thinnest of margins and must sell as many seats per flight as possible, we'll find something missing from the most of the briefings in this study – namely all the people on those crowded flights.

### What is Present and What is Absent?

Even though the images in safety briefings focus tightly on the activity surrounding each task, in most of the briefings that we've seen, we get the feeling that we're on a seemingly empty plane. Whether we're witnessing United's method of presenting an open-air cabin with no walls to confine passengers, Delta's flight attendant demonstrating how to put on a life vest while everyone else just sits there, or Continental's depiction of a person exiting a plane by himself, these airlines conspicuously remove passengers from many of the sequences that we've been discussing.

Some might find these details to be quibbles, but they do grossly misrepresent the situation. Going back to our discussion in Chapter 3 of the Air France flight that evacuated in Toronto, we can find accounts of passengers who experienced the crowding, panic, and ridiculous behavior that actually ensue during an evacuation:

The first words from the crew were ‘The aircraft is fine. Stay calm, [and] remain in your seats.’ But passengers at the back of the plane were screaming ‘Fire!’

Flight attendants weren’t instructing people to leave everything. I went down [the slide] barefoot behind this guy who had a carry-on. He was sort of stuck, and I got thrown into another guy.

The closest exit was a few rows in front of me, but there was no slide there and a lady was blocking my way, too afraid to jump.

Nobody was telling us what to do. People were grabbing their belongings and taking pictures while the cabin was filling up with smoke. (Condé Nast 130)

These four accounts of what happened on a “successful” evacuation bear little resemblance to the images in the actual briefings. They also beg the question: should a safety briefing take such possibilities into consideration? Should we show passengers

diverting from a blocked exit to a clear one? Should the instructions on deploying an evacuation slide tell passengers what to do if the slide fails?

The FAA requires airplane manufacturers to run evacuation drills that involve emptying a full plane in ninety seconds with just half of the available exits. While this requirement sounds overly cautious, the fact remains that, on average, escape slides fail 37% of the time (NTSB 78), and numerous accident reports have revealed that multiple exits were blocked, inoperable, or otherwise inaccessible. In the end, the government's "worst-case" standard isn't a far cry from reality. While showing foolish passengers taking snapshots might not be necessary, or helpful, instructing people to leave their belongings or showing passengers how to open an exit when there are people sitting in the seats next to it would have more practical implications – and speak more closely of the shared condition that we could experience as evacuating passengers.

### How Are We Limited in Our Ways of Seeing?

If we can identify elements that are present and absent from these documents, then we should go further to ask ourselves how we're limited in our ways of seeing. As we've discussed so far, we're limited from seeing accurate depictions of what an evacuation looks like. I'm not advocating gratuitously violent or dark images any more than I would send the message that evacuating a plane (under any circumstances) is going to be a calm, problem-free procedure. Yet all of the briefings that we've discussed in these analyses exhibit base-level signifiers that point to the contrary.

### Can We Place Ourselves in the Image, Identifying with It?

Placing ourselves within the images of a safety briefing is key when understanding what to do and how/where to do it. The short answer to the question, “can we place ourselves in the image, identifying it?,” is sometimes yes; sometimes no. In Delta’s briefing, for example, we see multiple long shots of the cabin, allowing us to better appreciate that the environment on the screen is the same one that we’re in. Still in other briefings, such as Virgin Atlantic’s, we don’t have the perspective to know where exactly we are or what we’re doing at all times.

### What Meanings are Preferred by the Work?

Deciphering what meanings are preferred by the work is akin to establishing authorial intent.<sup>20</sup> We can ascribe a preferred meaning to a work, but we cannot be sure that it will match with the meaning that the document’s creator intended. But in the case of decoding an airline’s safety briefing, we have an easier time of proposing a plausible preferred meaning. We would be safe in assuming that airlines don’t want their planes to experience emergencies, and they don’t want to unnecessarily worry people into thinking that something could go wrong while flying. Statistics tell us that the odds of our experiencing an emergency situation on a plane are minute. I recently heard a pilot tell me that we’d have to fly 365 days a year for 14,000 years before experiencing a fatal accident on a major U.S. air carrier – statistically speaking. The fact is that millions of people fly every day, and the vast majority of them experience no emergency situations –

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<sup>20</sup> See Wimsatt and Beardsley’s *Intentional Fallacy*.

and probably never will. But low odds don't mean that we're impervious to emergencies onboard airliners, so airlines must carefully filter the ways that they impart preferred meanings.<sup>21</sup>

So far, we've looked at airline safety briefings through multiple lenses in an attempt to understand the rhetorical situations that necessitate these communications, the techniques for disseminating information in these communications, and the cultural implications that these communications hold for their readers. I'd like to sum up this chapter by providing my accounts of a focus group that I conducted with travelers from the University of Central Florida. I think ending with the focus group is appropriate because it allows us to take a lighter, though no less important, look at the ways that these documents function. The focus group also reminds us of the rhetorical constraints that the writers of these documents will have to address in order to provide passengers with useful documents; the passengers remind us of the human needs that writers must meet – in addition to the technical.

### Passenger Focus Group

However much analysis we conduct on documents, there is still significant value in gathering data from potential users. I typically observe passengers' behavior on board airplanes, but in those instances, I can only see what they do and speculate about their actions. In addition, onboard an airplane isn't the best place to understand how

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<sup>21</sup> See my discussion of euphemisms in safety briefings earlier in this chapter.

passengers feel about safety briefings in general. There is neither the ability to compare different presentation styles nor the (convenient) means of learning passenger opinions. Since my research in this chapter has involved various methods of understanding the effects that safety briefings have on passengers, I wanted to ensure that passenger perceptions were represented. Krueger and Casey explain the key benefits to conducting focus groups:

Often, people in power see a situation or issue differently from those who are not. Professional people (medical, educational, scientific, technical, business, legal) often lose touch with the very people they are trying to serve. And top management often sees issues differently than frontline providers do. These differences can cause major problems, particularly when they aren't recognized and understood. (24)

To that end, I conducted a focus group session in which participants viewed the same clips that I've been discussing so far and talked about their experiences with commercial air travel. Going into the focus group, my goal was to get a better sense of passengers' perceptions of the airline safety briefings. As is common with focus groups, I gained significantly more than I had expected. In the following section I discuss my methods and results of the focus group as well as how those results relate to my analyses throughout this dissertation.

## Participants

The focus group consisted of four UCF students (three females and one male) with the following characteristics (and pseudonyms):

- Tina – a 19-year-old who had recently completed her first trip on a commercial airliner.
- Suzanne – an 18-year-old frequent flyer.
- Richard – an 18-year-old moderate flyer.
- Julia – a 20-year-old frequent flyer.

## Methods

The goal of my focus group was to have passengers, or potential passengers, evaluate methods for presenting passenger safety information. Just as the airline industry is devoting more attention to video demonstrations, I limited my focus group to evaluating only video safety briefings. I limited the number of participants in the each group to six (only four attended), and the session lasted one hour. The participants sat at a large table directly across from an LCD video monitor, which displayed videos from my laptop. I devised two main activities for the focus group: a drawing exercise and a question-and-answer session that followed the passengers' viewing excerpts from five safety briefings.

### Methods: Drawing Pictures

Before showing any safety briefings to the passengers, I wanted to get a sense of how they perceived air travel. During the first activity, I asked the participants to draw two pictures. First I asked them to think about air travel in general. I encouraged them to think about any aspect of flying commercially and then gave them five minutes to draw a picture. Next, I asked the participants to think about airline safety briefings and allowed them five minutes to complete another drawing. After completing both drawings, the participants had an opportunity to speak about their creations.

### Methods: Discussing Video Briefings

After the participants had completed and discussed their drawings, I showed them a series of clips from five safety briefings. Even though each airline included essentially the same information in its briefing, the order of information varied, so I chose specific topics and edited three video clips. Each clip contained all five airlines' presentations of the same information in the same order. I arranged the airlines' clips alphabetically to keep the order of presentation consistent. I included the following topics from the airlines' briefings:

- Welcome message.
- Seatbelt and smoking information.
- Oxygen masks and life vests.



## Results: Participant's Drawings – Perceptions of Flying in General

I was pleased to see that the style and content of the participants' drawings varied significantly. I'll discuss the major features of each participant's drawings combined with notes that I took from the discussion that we held after the drawing exercises. For the first drawing, I asked the participants to think about commercial air travel in general.

### Tina

Not until our discussion about the drawings did I discover that Tina had recently completed her first trip on an airplane. Her drawing (Figure 2) about her perceptions of flying in general depicted elements of anxiety and skepticism regarding the process of flying. The most significant portion of the drawing was a cutaway view of an airplane flying through clouds. In the drawing every seat on the plane contains a faceless passenger except for the one where Tina is sitting. Tina has depicted herself with frazzled hair, a frown on her face, and tears streaming from her eyes. Her hands are drawn up to her face representing a distressed traveler. At the front of the aircraft, Tina has drawn a flight deck with one "autopilot" and one human pilot who is sleeping. This main portion of the drawing is labeled "during." At the bottom left corner of the page, we see a "before" self-portrait that depicts Tina nervously chewing on her fingernails. In the bottom right corner, we find the "after" portrait in which Tina is smiling and raising her hands in celebration.

Tina's drawing represents a common shared condition of the general flying public. Fear of flying is present across all segments of society, and Tina openly expresses her discomfort with the process of flying as well as its enigmatic aspects, represented by the sleeping pilot and personified "auto pilot." When I asked Tina about her drawing, she immediately explained the fears that she experienced as a first-time flyer. Even though she felt victorious over the process once she'd reached her destination, Tina said that she would still be nervous the next time that she flew.

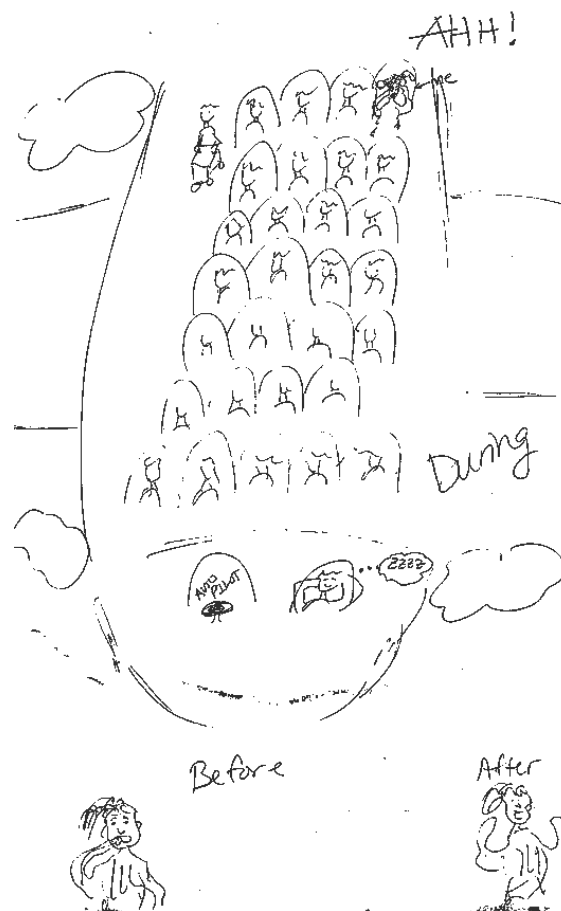


Figure 2: Tina's Perceptions of Commercial Air Travel

### Suzanne

Suzanne was a frequent flyer, and her perceptions of flying were completely different from Tina's. Suzanne confined her drawing to just the top portion of the page, and she depicted the aspects of flying that typically frustrate seasoned travelers (Figure 3). At the top of the page, Suzanne drew a long line of people coming across the page from left to right. One of the figures in the line has a thought bubble over its head with "such a long line" written inside. Closer to the front of the line, another figure says, "finally made it." And the person at the very front of the line is viewing an information screen only to find out that her flight has been canceled. Below the line of people, an airplane holds two passengers, both of which represent more of Suzanne's frustrations with flying. One passenger is thinking, "wonder if we will get drinks?" The other passenger is asking, "will my bags get there?" Like Tina, Suzanne represents common perceptions about commercial air travel. Also like Tina, Suzanne provides a picture that is relative to her level of experience as a traveler. Her anxieties are about the logistics and comforts of her trip, rather than the safety aspects.

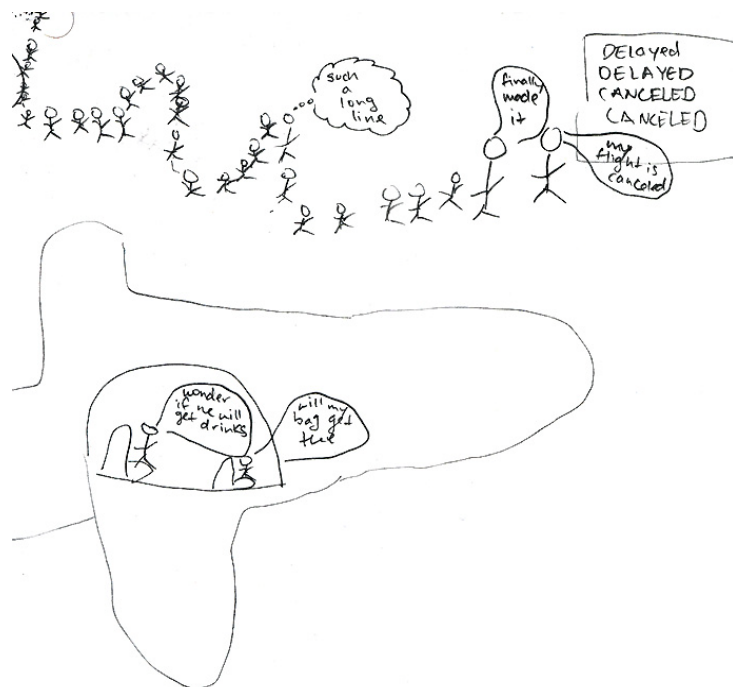


Figure 3: Suzanne's Perceptions of Commercial Air Travel

### Richard

Richard was another experienced traveler in the group, and like Suzanne's, his drawing depicts non-flying aspects of air travel. In Richard's drawing (Figure 4), we see him going through the security screening process. In the background, he is walking through a metal detector with a blank expression on his face; however, we also see a thought bubble that depicts Richard's hair standing on end, and his mouth open as if yelling. In the foreground Richard is smiling and commenting, "the hard part is over!" The only people, other than Richard, in the drawing are security guards. Richard later explained that he feels anxious when he goes through the security screening process

before a flight. He said that even though he has nothing to hide, he's still afraid that he will be suspected of "being a terrorist."

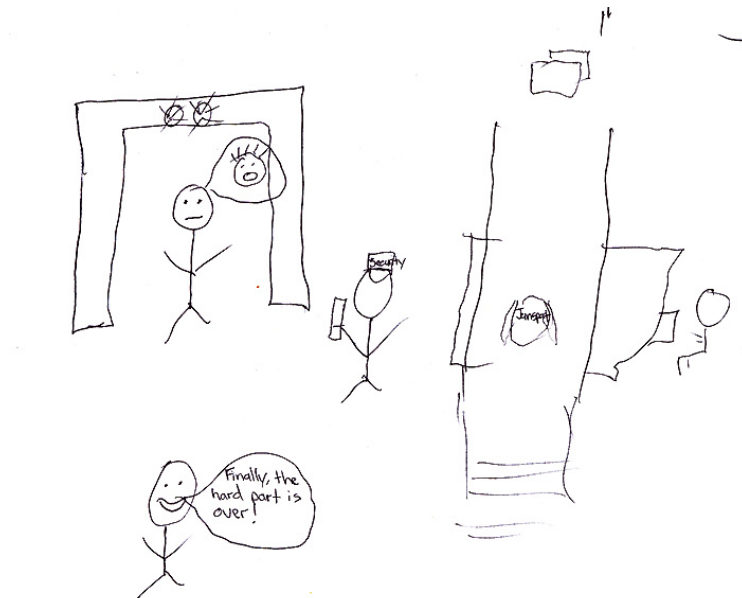


Figure 4: Richard's Perceptions of Commercial Air Travel

#### Julia

Julia described herself as flying only a few times per year. Her first picture (Figure 5) was the most abstract of the group. It contained six neatly spaced items representing different emotions that she associates with flying. For example, the globe resting on two hands represents how accessible the world feels to Julia when she flies. A group of balloons expresses her happiness, and two butterflies signify nervous feelings. The last item of Julia's drawing wasn't obvious to me, and I had to ask her for clarification. The item looks like a window with four panes of glass, and Julia explained that this "window" represents a prison and that she feels captive while on a plane.



Figure 5: Julia's Perceptions of Commercial Air Travel

### Results: Participant's Drawings – Perceptions of Airline Safety Briefings

Next I asked the participants to draw their perceptions of the safety briefings that they see when flying commercially. As with the first prompt, each person's drawing depicted noticeably different takes on common perceptions of air travel.

#### Tina

Tina, our first-time flyer, again represented popular anxieties related to flying (Figure 6). In the upper left corner, we see an ominously placed "fasten your seat belts" sign – and rightfully so. What follows below the sign is a spider web of terrifying events,

including a plane nose diving into the water, a panic-stricken person with oxygen masks dangling above her head, and a reluctant person clinging to a seat cushion as she's being told to "Evacuate!" At the center of this web of terror, we see the back of a passenger's head looking over an unfolded safety brochure.

During our discussion of the second drawing, Tina explained that the safety demonstration had placed visions in her head similar to those that she drew on the page. She said that she studied the safety brochure thoroughly and was alarmed at some of the procedures that she might be required to perform. Tina's fears are certainly not unique, but her newness to flying seemed to make her more willing to discuss the way the process made her feel. Seeing Tina's drawing helps us conceptualize her anxieties and tap into our own perceptions about what it could mean to experience an emergency onboard an aircraft.



Figure 6: Tina's Perceptions of Airline Safety Briefings



### Suzanne

Suzanne's drawing (Figure 7) about her perceptions of safety briefings presents a skeptic's attitude towards the material. In the upper left portion of the drawing, Suzanne has drawn herself tucked tightly in bed as she thinks, "can sleep through it." To the right, Suzanne has drawn a passenger who is thinking, "don't think life jacket will do any good if we plunge into the ocean." And at the bottom of the drawing, another passenger is thinking, "when was this thing filmed? The 60s?"

This drawing represents some of the very attitudes that the FAA is trying to get airlines to combat. Suzanne is bored by the content that she has seen in previous safety briefings, and she is distracted by the fact that the production values are dated. Suzanne also has doubts about how relevant the information in the briefing is to her, feeling uncertain whether that information would even help her.



Figure 7: Suzanne's Perceptions of Airline Safety Briefings

#### Richard

Also presenting skepticism, Richard's drawing (Figure 8) about his perceptions of safety briefings shows a disengaged traveler who is witnessing a blathering flight attendant and simultaneously thinking that the information won't do him any good in the event of an emergency. The passenger in Richard's drawing is also commenting on the lack of information that he is receiving, wondering "why do they never show us the rafts under our seats?"

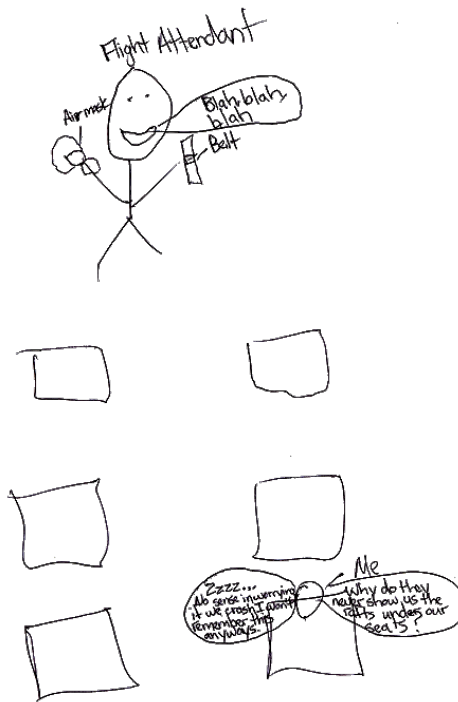


Figure 8: Richard's Perceptions of Airline Safety Briefings

#### Julia

Julia's second drawing (Figure 9) also levels criticism against airline safety briefings, even if in a less sarcastic manner. The drawing contains three elements: Julia sleeping comfortably in her chair, a flight attendant announcing "important" information (but delivering it in a "monotone" style), and a passenger clinging to a seat cushion while floating near a piece of wreckage. Like her fellow focus-group members, Julia feels that the safety information she receives while flying lacks engaging qualities and possibly leaves her misinformed.



Figure 9: Julia's Perceptions of Airline Safety Briefings

### Discussion of Video Safety Briefings

For the final activity, the participants viewed clips from five airlines' video safety briefings. Each clip contained the same piece of safety information as presented by each airline. For example, clip one contained all five airlines' welcome message and requests for passengers' attention. After viewing each clip, the group members were given an opportunity to discuss their feelings about what they had just seen. The most useful metric for capturing these feelings was also the most basic: counting positive and negative statements. In each of the following sections, I provide an overview of the following information:

- Number of positive statements observed while watching the video.
- Number of negative statements observed while watching the video.

- General comments during the discussion.

### Topic One: Welcome Message

The first topic contained five consecutive welcome messages. These messages were delivered by a variety of authority figures, ranging from an unseen narrator to an airline's CEO. All of the clips received both positive and negative comments from the group, with Continental receiving the most negatives (six) and Virgin Atlantic receiving the most positives (five). Table 13 summarizes the participants' perceptions of the airlines' welcome messages.

Table 13: Summary of Comments on Airlines' Welcome Messages

Airline	Positives	Negatives	Examples of Comments from Discussion
Continental	1	6	"I'm already on your airline; you don't have to convince me anymore." "Who's <i>this</i> guy?" "Nice chairs." "Too long!"
Delta	3	2	"Cute pilot." "I like seeing up front. Makes it believable." "Music's too weird." "Shouldn't he be flying the plane?"
Virgin America	3	1	"Short and sweet." "He doesn't even ask us for our attention."
Virgin Atlantic	5	4	"I like the characters." "That guy is...so cheesy." "The music is too smooth....it's like they're trying to convince me that I don't need to pay attention." "Fun!"

Airline	Positives	Negatives	Examples of Comments from Discussion
United	3	3	“She’s trying to be too calm.” “Couldn’t they get original music?”

### Topic Two: Fasten Seatbelt

The next series of video segments focused on each airline’s ability to provide simple instruction. I played the group clips containing information on using seatbelts and following no-smoking rules. After the group had seen all five clips, they shared their perceptions of what they had seen. Table 14 provides an overview of their comments.

Table 14: Summary of Comments on Airlines’ Seatbelt Information

Airline	Positives	Negatives	Examples of Comments from Discussion
Continental	2	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Boring.”</li> <li>• “It’s good for what it is.”</li> </ul>
Delta	4	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “This is the one I’ve heard about.”</li> <li>• “Oh my gosh!”</li> <li>• “She’s too sexy.”</li> </ul>
Virgin America	0	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “He’s rude!”</li> <li>• “I feel like I’m an idiot or something.”</li> <li>• “Very condescending.”</li> </ul>
Virgin Atlantic	1	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “He’s too British!”</li> <li>• “Those characters are cute.”</li> </ul>
United	2	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like the lady.”</li> <li>• “They’re not even on a plane.”</li> <li>• “Nobody does their seatbelt like that.”</li> </ul>

### Topic Three: Putting on Life Vests

The final topic that the participants viewed contained the methods for locating and putting on life vests and using oxygen masks. This information was the most complex that all five briefings had in common. Table 15 provides an over of the participants' responses after seeing the life-vest clips.

Table 15: Summary of Comments on Airlines' Life-Vest Information

Airline	Positives	Negatives	Examples of Comments
Continental	2	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Still boring."</li><li>• "She's easy to understand."</li><li>• "The Spanish subtitles are too fast for anyone to really keep up with."</li></ul>
Delta	3	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "He's funny."</li><li>• "They're trying too hard."</li><li>• "Which is it?" [in reference to the multiple locations where passengers could find life vests]</li></ul>
Virgin America	2	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "I'm tired of hearing this guy."</li><li>• "He makes me not want to listen."</li><li>• "I like seeing two people put them on."</li></ul>
Virgin Atlantic	3	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "The music changed to a rap beat when the black guy was on the screen. I found that very offensive."</li><li>• "I like the kid!"</li></ul>
United	2	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "What was that about pulling one handle [on the vest]?"</li><li>• "They don't really inflate them."</li><li>• "It's easy to see everything."</li></ul>

### Summing up with the Focus Group

After hearing the focus group's comments about each section of the briefings, I asked them to choose their favorite. I was surprised that the entire group, without debate, agreed on the same briefing. They chose the Delta briefing as their favorite because it "showed more angles," "looked like it was [filmed in] a real plane," and it "looked current." Despite those strengths, the group still had criticisms for Delta's video, including its being "too sexy" and "missing information." When I asked the focus group what it thought of the two animated briefings, they felt that the briefings were entertaining but concluded that they "had a hard time connecting to animat[ion]" and "wouldn't want to see cartoons" in place of human actors the next time that they flew. When I asked the group to rank the five briefings from best to worst, the group quickly reached the following consensus:

1. Delta
2. United
3. Virgin America
4. Continental
5. Virgin Atlantic

This ranking was similar to the one derived from the content analysis earlier in this chapter, in which Delta and United tied for first place and Continental was fourth (with Virgin America and Virgin Atlantic trading their positions from what's listed above).



## Conclusion

The methods in this chapter have provided a multi-faceted approach for understanding safety briefings – from the perspective of the writer and reader. But we needn't limit these techniques to this specific type of document. With a few context-specific manipulations, a writer could use these practices to better understand any document's literal and manifest contents, as well as ways that those contents affect readers. In the next chapter, I will propose using techniques like the ones in this chapter as part of a pedagogy for teaching technical-writing students how to gain better understandings of their documents and the rhetorical situations surrounding them.

## CHAPTER 5: APPLYING THE PEDAGOGY

### Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have used a variety of techniques to assess airline safety briefings for their abilities to successfully connect with readers and communicate risk. Providing readers with technically correct prose is key to producing useful documents, but alone, it can't satisfy the requirements of creating fully functional, reader-centric texts. Writers must look beyond pragmatic approaches to documentation and consider the full spectrum of constraints related to a document's rhetorical situation.

Some of the methods I used were premeditated (e.g., conducting style and visual analyses of the documents), and others I discovered along the way (e.g., talking with flight attendants, airline executives, passengers, and producers of safety documentation; or musing about my personal experiences with the safety briefings). These methods dovetail with my work in the Texts and Technology program because they examine a set of documents relative to production, pedagogy, and cultural studies. As a teacher of technical writing and a practicing technical writer, I can envision how any of these activities could produce rich experiences (and results) in students' understanding and managing rhetorical situations. The goal of the methodology that I outline in this chapter is to provide writers with a "low-cost" tool for analyzing complex rhetorical situations. And as I've demonstrated in the previous chapters, my work helped me uncover and understand constraints of a rhetorical situation through the following:

- Researching a document's history as it relates to business and regulatory practices (Chapter 2).
- Understanding the organizational politics that shape writers, documents, and readers alike (Chapter 3).
- Self reflecting to understand whether/how the document has touched and/or influenced my life experiences (Chapters 2 & 3).
- Analyzing the style of the documentation as it relates to better understanding organizational ethos and audience needs (Chapter 4).
- Conducting cultural analysis of documents to better understand how they acknowledge the audience's shared condition (Chapter 4).
- Conducting research that connects writer with readers to promote dialogue for addressing readers' needs while acknowledging their shared conditions (Chapter 4).

In this chapter, I draw upon the above to propose a methodology for teachers of technical communication. The goal of this methodology is to empower students to be more than just experts at composing prose for an audience. By helping students think about how they identify with the documents they're creating, the cultures (audience or organizational) they're serving, and the techniques they're employing, this methodology can help prepare students more thoroughly for the complex rhetorical situations that they will encounter as working technical writers. In addition to helping students understand rhetorical situation as more than just choosing the right document for the audience's skill

set, the methods I'm describing can coax students out of their writerly bubbles – engaging them as participants in a multi-dimensional process that relies on social interaction and cultural understanding. And at the course-logistics level, it can provide relief to students who feel inundated with the sometimes repetitive nature of a “tech-comm.” class, in which they often focus on learning and composing business-documentation genres. As Bazerman reminds us:

...the largest lesson...is not that there are simple genres that must be slavishly followed, that we must give students an appropriate set of cookie cutters for the anticipated careers, but rather that the students must understand and rethink the rhetorical choices embedded in each generic habit to master the genre. (8)

### Teaching Rhetorical Situation by Establishing Affiliations

The techniques that I've described in the previous chapters will work for some rhetorical situations better than others, so the teacher's role in helping students decide how to filter which methods are appropriate for their projects is as important as that of helping students learn the principles of effective writing style. Regardless of which techniques are employed, the goal of my pedagogy is to establish affiliations, conceptually and literally, between the writer and the stakeholders in any documentation project. In *Context-Sensitive Text Analysis*, Thomas N. Huckin provides observations that lie at the foundation of what I'm proposing:

The process movement has served the valuable purpose of shifting attention away from generic models and finished products, emphasizing instead the inventional aspects of writing and the processes by which individuals produce texts. But individuals do not write in a vacuum. They belong to discourse communities, they have socially influenced purposes and goals, they borrow language and ideas from other people – in short, they live and perform in some multivariiegated, sociocultural *context*. The processes by which competent writers produce successful pieces of writing are not decontextualized cognitive operations or expressive acts carried out by isolated individuals; rather, they are more broadly based processes embedded within and influenced by *community affiliations* (emphasis added). (84)

Huckins' *community affiliations* casts a broad net, but viewing the writer's roles relative to affiliations can better inform students about their place in the rhetorical situation and help them clarify the goals of their communities. As teachers, we understand that our students will ultimately face complexities beyond what we can express in the classroom, but the students may not realize that view until they've experienced these complexities first hand in the workplace. We can't simulate, or even predict, the situations that students will encounter, but we can introduce them to tools that will help bring a critical perspective to these complex situations when they arise.

### Underscoring the Need for a New Pedagogy

In Chapter 2, I discussed a gap in technical communication textbooks, which I routinely sift through before starting a new semester. Some of these texts are beautiful documents, pleasing to the sight and touch. And most of them soundly address essential elements for learning technical communication. Still, I find that many lack in providing students with the tools they need to comprehend rhetorical situation as a general topic – let alone as something that they’ll experience in the professional world. That’s not to say that these texts neglect topics like ethics, organizational structures, or even politics, but these aren’t presented as *constraints* relative to a *rhetorical situation* that the student must negotiate. What’s more the majority of the texts that I’ve seen fail to engage the student as an agent – both as an individual and a part of an organization with *its* own agency. Finally the texts in question don’t present alternative tools for the writers to better understand their audiences’ shared conditions and culture. Also in Chapter 2, I recalled a conversation in which I discussed the content of technical communication textbooks with the then director of my university’s writing program. I left that conversation wondering how other teachers of technical communication characterize their texts’ treatments of rhetorical situation and whether they have to fill gaps that they find in their texts.

Returning to the final question of the survey that I discussed in Chapter 2, I asked the respondents to describe any pedagogical methods that they use for teaching rhetorical situation. Twelve out of the 15 respondents expounded upon their techniques. This

question was most important to me because it would allow me to see how teachers are addressing rhetorical situation with their students, regardless of the texts/readings that they use in class. My main interest was to see whether the techniques that I have used in my own rhetorical analysis overlap with what other teachers are using. Based on this interest, I coded the major techniques that I used in my analysis and read for them in the responses from the survey. The techniques that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter included the following:

- Researching the history of a particular document (or those similar to it).
- Assessing the politics of the organization(s) in which the document operates.
- Reflecting on personal experiences with the document.
- Conducting detailed technical style analyses.
- Conducting cultural analysis on existing documents.
- Connecting with writers who have worked with the documents (or similar ones).
- Connecting with readers who would use the document.

Table 16 summarizes the above techniques and their occurrences in the responses from other technical communication teachers.

Table 16: Teachers Who Report Using the Proposed Techniques

<b>Technique</b>	<b>No. of Teachers who use Techniques</b>
Researching document history	1
Assessing organizational politics	1
Reflecting on personal experiences with document	1
Conducting detailed style analyses	0
Conducting cultural analyses	0
Connecting with writers who work on similar documents	2
Connecting with readers who use the document	0

The above comparison of my techniques with those of other teachers has a flaw because my question to those teachers was whether they had any “special” pedagogical techniques for helping students understand the complexities of rhetorical situations. Some of the techniques I’m listing aren’t necessarily special and may not have been listed by respondents even though they engage in them. Still, some of the techniques are less likely to be found in traditional technical-writing curricula, such as interviewing readers (the focus is usually on interviewing writers), reflecting on personal experiences with documents, or incorporating cultural analysis in the writing process. Though not as robust as originally planned, my survey of teachers supports my experiential observations that rhetorical situation is not developed as fully as it could be in technical communication curricula. The goal of my pedagogy is to infuse techniques that are traditionally taught in the technical communication classroom with those that are often reserved for other types of academic and social inquiry. Also, my methodology seeks to encourage students to use



the traditional tools (such as principles of effective writing style) in ways that escape the confines of pragmatic document analyses. In the following sections, I briefly recount the techniques that this methodology comprises for understanding and responding to rhetorical situations, and I explore how teachers might apply these techniques in the classroom.

### Creating a Pedagogy for Understanding Rhetorical Situations

Before I begin summarizing my methodology for understanding rhetorical situations, I want to emphasize that this is not a turnkey solution or a template that can be applied across all rhetorical situations. As teachers of technical communication, we know that documents don't fall into clear-cut categories as we'd often like them to, and our collaborative experiences with industry have taught us that the culture of an organization can range from open-minded to oppressive. The methodology that I'm proposing is an exercise for both students' and teachers' approaches to technical writing.

### A Tool for Technical Writers

In this section, I provide a recap of the techniques that I used for assessing a complex rhetorical situation and explore how these techniques might be implemented in technical communication classrooms. The collection of these techniques comprises a tool that writers can employ in the field. This tool, at the most basic level, should involve answering the following questions:

- What is the history of the document or its genre?

- How do the politics of the organization(s) involved with producing, regulating, and using the document affect the writer? The reader?
- How has the document (or ones similar to it) affected the writer? Does the writer have personal experiences with the document? What emotions or ideas does the document evoke in the writer?
- What is the condition of the document's style? (Answering this question involves detailed style analysis as demonstrated in Chapter 4.)
- What messages could the document be creating relative to the cultures of the readers? (Answering this question requires an appropriate cultural analysis, possibly like those demonstrated in Chapter 4.)
- How do readers view the document?
- How do writers characterize the document? How is their work on the document affected by the constraints of the rhetorical situation?

The above questions only loosely frame the tool, allowing students to tailor their rhetorical analyses appropriately for their documents. To help teachers demonstrate this tool for students, I expound on the above questions by identifying possible activities that students could complete during the semester of a typical technical writing class.

### Researching Document Histories

Though it may sound like an obvious move on the writers' part, I've witnessed firsthand the lack of historical perspective that writers often bring to complex

documentation projects. Whether learning how a document has been used in an organization or how it has been overseen by governmental agencies, writers can benefit dramatically from understanding how the current state of a document (or its genre) has come to be. Even if students spend some time conducting Google searches that introduce them to business, academic, and governmental sources of information about their current projects, they can begin to understand the implications (legal or other otherwise) of the plans that they make early in the writing process. For example, when students begin work on their semester projects, teachers could charge them with spending one class period on conducting internet or library research on the documents that they'll be creating or editing. To keep students on track, the teacher could assign a deliverable such as a brief synopsis of the state of the documents. To ensure that the goals of this assignment are consistently met, the teacher might also provide a list of questions that the students must answer.

### Assessing Organizational Politics

I would venture to say that understanding the politics of any organization at the employee level is one of the most difficult things to do. The political process takes time, sometimes years, to fully expose itself when people are involved, but that's not to say that students can't get a feel for how an organization works. At the higher level, politics may be easier for students to assess because they can conduct public research about the relationships of power between different entities (for example the FAA and airlines or airlines and passengers). By getting students to contemplate the relationships that form

organizations, we can help them approach those relationships that unfold during the documentation process with a critical eye. As Teresa Harrisson and Susan Katz remind us, “meaningful change can take place only when organizational members are equipped to reflect critically on the organizational world they wish to inhabit” (27). Because students may not actually inhabit the organizational worlds for which they’ll be writing, students can use examples from their own lives to understand how politics work. For example, students could look at their social clubs (fraternities, sororities, or professional or recreational groups) or even their own families to identify the roles that operate in those groups and how the stakeholders are affected by such roles. Teachers could ask the students to represent the organizations through flow charts, drawings, or even verbal explanations to identify how power flows among and affects the members of the group. Students who don’t feel strong affiliations with clubs could analyze political roles in popular documentaries by filmmakers like Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock.

### Reflecting on Personal Experiences with the Document

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, some of the techniques that I used in this dissertation were planned well in advance of my writing, and others emerged along the way. One of these surprise techniques for me was self-reflection – as it pertained to the documents that I was studying. Throughout my writing, I routinely found myself musing about my experiences with airline safety briefings, and these actions benefitted me in several ways. At the most basic level, they allowed me an initial personal point of reference for the documents. Any writer probably has perceptions of a

document or that document's genre, and those perceptions can inform the writer's understanding of a complex rhetorical situation. The exercise, and it was an ongoing one for me, can be more than just voicing initial reactions to a document or its topic; instead, teachers can encourage students to conduct free-writing sessions, brainstorm, or structured journal entries. Again, students may have limited experiences with the documents in their projects, so teachers could provide this assignment early on the semester by having students reflect about documents that they see on a daily basis (e.g., credit-card offers, political ads, or graphics from new sources like USA Today). If teachers can get their students to realize existing affiliations with a document/genre, then those affiliations may inform the students' other analyses of the constraints making up the rhetorical situation.

### Conducting Detailed Style Analyses

Again a deceptively simple idea, reflective analyses on writing styles is often reserved for senior- or graduate-level coursework. Granted, beginning technical communicators rely on their teachers to help them learn the principles of effective style, but the process becomes one dimensional if students rely exclusively on teacher validation of their prose rather than attempt to deconstruct it (at whatever level their skill sets allow). But too often, the emphasis on writing style falls on learning rules and practicing them via textbook exercises. Time is usually the enemy of thorough analysis projects, which can take weeks for students to complete properly. Over analysis can be counterproductive and frustrating for writers who are learning new skill sets, so teachers

can help students choose manageable portions of their texts for analyzing. The exercise may feel tedious (I certainly know from experience), but it's an incredibly rewarding one that allows the writer to see more than just grammatical structure. For example, in Chapter 4, my analysis of simple hedges led me to see the euphemisms that airlines were employing in their documents – an aspect of my overall discussion that I hadn't articulated before conducting that style analysis.

### Conducting Cultural Analyses

Traditional cultural studies are finally making their way into the discussion of technical communication. In *Critical Power Tools*, Blake Scott et al. provide the first cohesive collection of works that draw upon cultural studies as a means of “responding to technical communication’s still largely uncritical, pragmatic orientation...” (1). The technique that I used in Chapter 4 drew upon visual cultural studies from van Leeuwen, Bell, Lister and Wells, and O’ Donnell. Those methods fit the genre of documents that I was assessing, but other theoretical and methodological approaches exist for students to apply to their writings. As with any of the strategies that I’m endorsing, the application of cultural studies need not be daunting to the students. Teachers can use class discussion coupled with readings pertinent to the students’ projects to start them down the path of reading texts with a critical cultural eye. For example, the teacher could begin by leading a discussion on the key concepts involved with cultural studies. To give students an engaging first activity, the teacher could provide a series of images, such as print advertisements from the 1950s. Students could break into small groups and discuss an

image, identifying representations of gender, class, or race. They could also look for vectors of power in the images. Finally, the students could prepare a statement or brief presentation in which they identify the cultural practices found in their advertisements and comment on whether those practices have changed.

### Connecting with Writers who Work on Similar Documents

As I found with my survey of teachers, this technique is widely used in technical communication courses, and it provides students with opportunities that just can't be replicated in the classroom. Finding professionals to participate may be a challenge for a lone teacher, but students can be involved in the process of making professional connections. As one respondent to my survey of teachers wrote regarding student-mentor relationships, "Many students initially resist this assignment but nearly all of them say it was the best part of the course once they complete it."

### Connecting with Readers who Use the Documents

"Connecting with readers" can involve a variety of activities, from focus groups to interviews to user testing. The concept of user testing finds its way into most technical-writing textbooks, and it can be a simple, invaluable tool for writers. In industry, focus groups are typically relegated to usability testing and product development, but they provide another technique for students to receive rich insight into the constraint of audience. For a student who has never organized such tasks, they can be intimidating. But teachers can introduce students to concepts such as *discount usability* (see Nielson),

which can help simplify the process for students while allowing them to reap significant rewards. Especially when implemented in the early stages of the writing process, interactions with readers can put writers in the rhetorical mindset to make decisions that will benefit both reader and organization alike. To put students into the mode of gleaning information from their readers, teachers can assign students to develop a set of instructions (possibly from their current projects) for a discount usability session. Even asking students work in groups to document something as simple as a making a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich can provide significant learning opportunities. The teacher can ask students to break into small groups and work together to write instructions for making their sandwich. After completing their instructions, the students can trade with another group and then follow the instructions exactly as written to make a sandwich (with supplies provided by the teacher). As they work, the students can make notes about any problems that they encounter with their instructions. Finally, each group can present their creation to the class and explain whether/how their set of directions failed them. Such activities are good for generating laughs, but they also help students see how the simplest tasks can be affected by faulty instructions. Because students are placed in both writer and audience roles for the same task, they experience the frustrations related to creating effective documents and using ineffective ones.

### Conclusion: Final Thoughts on Applying my Pedagogy to Technical Communication

The pedagogy, or collection of techniques, that I'm proposing is meant to be a tool to put teachers and students into a critical mindset for approaching rhetorical



situations. I'd be the first to admit that patently applying these techniques to every document that a student encounters would be counterproductive. My aim is to provide a flexible, critical framework that teachers can tailor to fit their pedagogical goals. As Carolyn Miller explains:

We ought not, in other words, simply design our courses and curricula to replicate existing practices, taking them for granted and seeking to make them more efficient on their own terms, making our students “more valuable to industry”; we ought instead to question those practices and encourage our students to do so too. (23)

Students should be afforded opportunities for exploring different techniques and deciding which ones work and which ones don't (with guidance from their teachers of course). Except for the lucky few students who graduate into to truly innovative work cultures, our classrooms could well be the last places that these writers are encouraged to experiment with techniques for planning and creating documentation. And the more techniques we arm them with, academically, the greater their abilities to shape policy – not just information – when they enter the complex rhetorical situations that await them after they leave us.

### Future Work with this Research

The first thing that I would like to do with my proposed pedagogy is implement it in one of my classrooms. Some of the techniques that I've described are based on

activities that I've used in previous classes, and others I've only recently discovered. In the upcoming semesters, I plan to work out specific assignments to help students practice what I've been discussing. Ultimately, I would like to plan an entire course with set activities and projects that seamlessly tie my techniques into a cohesive curriculum. I envision my pedagogy working best in an upper-level or graduate course because the students would have an easier time managing the techniques if they're already comfortable with essential principles of technical writing. But I still believe that these techniques can be tailored to fit any technical communication course, and I expect to test my theory in the coming months.

The other work that I would like to pursue after this dissertation relates to the airline industry. My research has helped me see deficiencies in the current communications between the government, airplane manufacturers, and airline operators. I find it troublesome that a federal agency can repeatedly call for change among the entities that it governs; yet its calls go unanswered. Without guidelines that employ specific language for change (along with a system in place for tracking those changes), the organizations that make up the industry will continue to interpret the rules as they choose. I would like to use my research as a platform for entering the discussions between government and the airline industry and use the skills that I've acquired through my studies in the Texts and Technology program to better inform their practices. I began this project thinking that I would propose radically different way for airlines to present safety information, but I now believe that the answers for improving these documents (at least

for now) will be found in using existing technologies more creatively while actively engaging the industry in reflective discourse about its practices.

## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE PAGE FROM STYLE ANALYSIS

Attributes: ———	0	Narrates: ○	7	Intensifiers: ~~~~~	15
Announcers: ~~~~~	0	Hedges: ○	10	Relators: ———	6

## Continental Briefing:

### Introduction:

#### CEO:

I'm Larry Kellner, Continental's *Chairman* and Chief Executive Officer. On behalf of my more than 40,000 co-workers, *we're* the most professional men and women in the business. Thanks for choosing to fly with us today. *We're committed to clean, safe, and reliable air transportation...* and the *highest* quality customer service. *We* have one of the *youngest* fleets in the industry, serve *hundreds* of destinations around the world, and are *constantly* improving our *products* and services — *both in the air and on the ground*. *In the future*, *we'll* work hard to maintain our *current* high ranking in customer satisfaction as *we* know *we* have to earn your business...every day. So wherever you're going, I invite you to *sit back*, relax, and enjoy your trip. *We* appreciate your business and look forward to service you on *this* and future flights. Welcome aboard.

### Securing Cabin:

#### Female Voice:

*We'll* be taking off momentarily. So please make sure your carryon baggage, tray tables, foot rests, and video monitors are stowed and secure...and your seatbacks are in the upright position. Whenever the seatbelt light is on, your seatbelt must be fastened low and tight across your lap. To fasten, slide the metal end into the buckle and *adjust* by pulling the loose end of the strap. *Lift* the buckle to *release*. The *captain* *may* turn off the seatbelt sign, indicating [that] you're free to move about the cabin. But *please* keep your seatbelt fastened whenever you're seated *and* while sleeping.

### Locating Exits:

This 757 has 10 exits...each clearly marked with red-and-white exit signs. Please take a moment *now* and locate the *two* exits nearest you, keeping in mind [that] the nearest exit *may* be *behind* you. *If* evacuation is necessary, and cabin visibility is reduced, aisle-path lighting will illuminate. A change in color or an *exit* sign will indicate [that] you have reached an exit. *All* doors are equipped with slide rafts, which *may* be detached and used as flotation devices. The window exits are equipped with a *ramp* and off wing *slide*. A life raft is located in an *over-head bin* at the over-wing exits. Your life vest is located in a container beneath, or in *some* cases, *between* each seat. *Pull* on the fabric strap to release the life-vest pouch. *Tear* open the pouch. Pull it over your head *while* placing your arms through the side straps. Pull the straps *firmly* to expose the back *panel*, and *tighten* by pulling on the yellow tabs. *Inflate* just prior to exiting the aircraft by pulling the *red* tabs...or manually *blowing* into the tubes at *shoulder* level. The night *locator* light *can* be illuminated by pulling the...pull-to-light tab.

## APPENDIX B: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SAFETY BRIEFINGS

Table 17: Coding and Scores for Continental's Welcome Message

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
<b>Values</b>	1.1	100	2.2	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.3	100
	1.2	80	2.3	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.3	60	2.1	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.2	33
	1.4	40	2.4	40	3.5	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.5	20	2.5	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.6	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 75.8

Table 18: Coding and Scores for Continental's Rules on Smoking

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
<b>Values</b>	1.1	100	2.3	100	3.5	100	4.1	100	5.1	100
	1.3	80	2.4	80	3.1	80	4.2	66	5.2	66
	1.4	60	2.2	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.5	40	3.2	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.1	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 43.8

Table 19: Coding and Scores for Continental's Instructions for Flotation Equipment

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
<b>Values</b>	1.3	100	2.3	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.2	100
	1.4	80	2.4	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.1	60	2.5	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.6	40	3.4	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.2	20	3.5	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.1	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 63.8

**Overall average for 3 Continental clips = 61.1**

Table 20: Coding and Scores for Delta's on Welcome Message

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
<b>Values</b>	1.1	100	2.2	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.3	100
	1.2	80	2.3	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.3	60	2.1	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.2	33
	1.4	40	2.4	40	3.5	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.5	20	2.5	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.6	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 86.4



Table 21: Coding and Scores for Delta's Rules on Smoking

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.3	100	3.5	100	4.1	100	5.1	100
	1.3	80	2.4	80	3.1	80	4.2	66	5.2	66
	1.4	60	2.2	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.5	40	3.2	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.1	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 80.0

Table 22: Coding and Scores for Delta's Instructions for Flotation Equipment

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.3	100	2.3	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.2	100
	1.4	80	2.4	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.1	60	2.5	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.6	40	3.4	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.2	20	3.5	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.1	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 85.2

**Overall average for 3 Delta clips = 84.0**

Table 23: Coding and Scores for United's Welcome Message

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.2	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.3	100
	1.2	80	2.3	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.3	60	2.1	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.2	33
	1.4	40	2.4	40	3.5	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.5	20	2.5	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.6	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 96

Table 24: Coding and Scores for United's Rules on Smoking

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.3	100	3.5	100	4.1	100	5.1	100
	1.3	80	2.4	80	3.1	80	4.2	66	5.2	66
	1.4	60	2.2	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.5	40	3.2	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.1	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 68.0

Table 25: Coding and Scores for United's Instructions for Flotation Equipment

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
Values	1.3	100	2.3	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.2	100
	1.4	80	2.4	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.1	60	2.5	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.6	40	3.4	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.2	20	3.5	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.1	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score =

**Overall average for 3 United clips = 84.0**

Table 26: Coding and Scores for Virgin America's Welcome Message

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
Values	1.1	100	2.2	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.3	100
	1.2	80	2.3	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.3	60	2.1	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.2	33
	1.4	40	2.4	40	3.5	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.5	20	2.5	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.6	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 14.6

Table 27: Coding and Scores for Virgin America's Rules on Smoking

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.3	100	3.5	100	4.1	100	5.1	100
	1.3	80	2.4	80	3.1	80	4.2	66	5.2	66
	1.4	60	2.2	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.5	40	3.2	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.1	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 51.8

Table 28: Coding and Scores for Virgin America's Instructions for Flotation Equipment

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.3	100	2.3	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.2	100
	1.4	80	2.4	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.1	60	2.5	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.6	40	3.4	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.2	20	3.5	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.1	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 53.2

**Overall average for 3 Virgin America clips = 39.9**

Table 29: Coding and Scores for Virgin Atlantic's Welcome Message

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.2	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.3	100
	1.2	80	2.3	80	3.2	80	4.2	66	5.1	66
	1.3	60	2.1	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.2	33
	1.4	40	2.4	40	3.5	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.5	20	2.5	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.6	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 61.2

Table 30: Coding and Scores for Virgin Atlantic's Rules on Smoking

Variables										
Values	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
	1.1	100	2.3	100	3.5	100	4.1	100	5.1	100
	1.3	80	2.4	80	3.1	80	4.2	66	5.2	66
	1.4	60	2.2	60	3.3	60	4.3	33	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.5	40	3.2	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.1	20	3.4	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.6	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 72.0

Table 31: Coding and Scores for Virgin Atlantic's Instructions for Flotation Equipment

	Variables									
	Narrator Interaction		Social Distance		Presentation Style		Visual Modality		Aural Modality	
	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score	code	score
<b>Values</b>	1.3	100	2.3	100	3.1	100	4.1	100	5.2	100
	1.4	80	2.4	80	3.2	80	4.2	66.	5.1	66
	1.1	60	2.5	60	3.3	60	4.3	33.	5.3	33
	1.5	40	2.6	40	3.4	40	4.4	0	5.4	0
	1.6	20	2.2	20	3.5	20	--	--	--	--
	1.2	0	2.1	0	--	--	--	--	--	--

Average score = 61.2

**Overall average for 3 Virgin Atlantic clips = 64.8**

## APPENDIX C: ONLINE SURVEY WITH TEACHERS OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

1. What is the primary textbook that you typically use in your introductory technical communication course?

Title:

Author:

Publisher:

---

For the following set of questions, I'd like for you to think about the primary textbook that you listed in question 1.

In his article "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd Bitzer discusses the term rhetorical situation as a "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential [need]" (Bitzer 8). Bitzer also tells us that we can resolve this need if we introduce discourse into the situation that constrains human decision or action to the point of significantly modifying the need. Rhetorical situation is a key concept for students of technical communication because they must know more than just who their audience is when creating discourse; they must understand the "complex" that is presenting the need for the discourse.

Considering the above explanation of rhetorical situation, please answer the following questions:

- 
2. Rank the following curriculum topics in order of importance for students who are learning about technical communication:

Recursive writing/editing

Project planning

Audience analysis

Ethics

Organizational politics/ethos

Physical work environment

Rhetorical analysis

- 
3. Which of the following tactics do you use to teach rhetorical situation?

☐ Scenarios or case studies

☐ Client-based projects (inside or outside the school)

☐ Service-learning projects

☐ Interviews with writers working in the field

☐ Analysis of documents from the field

- 
4. What strategies does your textbook offer to help students solve ethical dilemmas that they will face in their daily work experiences?

☐ Simple advice that would apply to any situation, such as a discussion of the "Golden Rule" (treat people the way you'd like to be treated).

☐ Ethical models that help students deconstruct ethical dilemmas.

☐ Case studies about writers who are presented with good-versus-evil ethical challenges, such a concealing information about potential dangers to the public or confronting colleagues who encourage a writer to falsify information.

☐ Role-playing scenarios that engage students by having them act out situations in class.



☐ Other:

---

5. How would you characterize your textbook's treatment of risk communication?

- ☐ It provides a substantive discussion of risk communication.
- ☐ It provides an overview of risk communication that I supplement with additional readings/activities.
- ☐ It does not address risk communication sufficiently; either I cover this topic on my own or leave it out of my course.
- 

6. Now I'd like to give you an opportunity to share your thoughts regarding the organizational constraints that writers may face while on the job. Do you have any special pedagogical techniques for helping students understand the complexities of the rhetorical situations in which they'll be writing?

Submit Survey

## APPENDIX D: APPROVAL FROM UCF IRB



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : UCF Institutional Review Board  
FWA00000351, Exp. 6/24/11, IRB00001138

To : Brian D. Blackburne

Date : October 08, 2008

IRB Number: SBE-08-05820

Study Title: **Writing Constraints: The Effects of Complex Rhetorical Situations on Writers and Their Documents**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Chair on 10/6/2008. **The expiration date is 10/5/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The category for which this study qualifies as expeditable research is as follows:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

A **waiver of documentation of consent** has been approved for all subjects for the online survey portion of the study. Participants do not have to sign a consent form, but the IRB requires that you give participants a copy of the IRB-approved consent form, letter, information sheet, or statement of voluntary consent at the top of the survey.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants in the focus group portion of the study to sign consent forms**. Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

**Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies.** The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 10/08/2008 08:38:14 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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